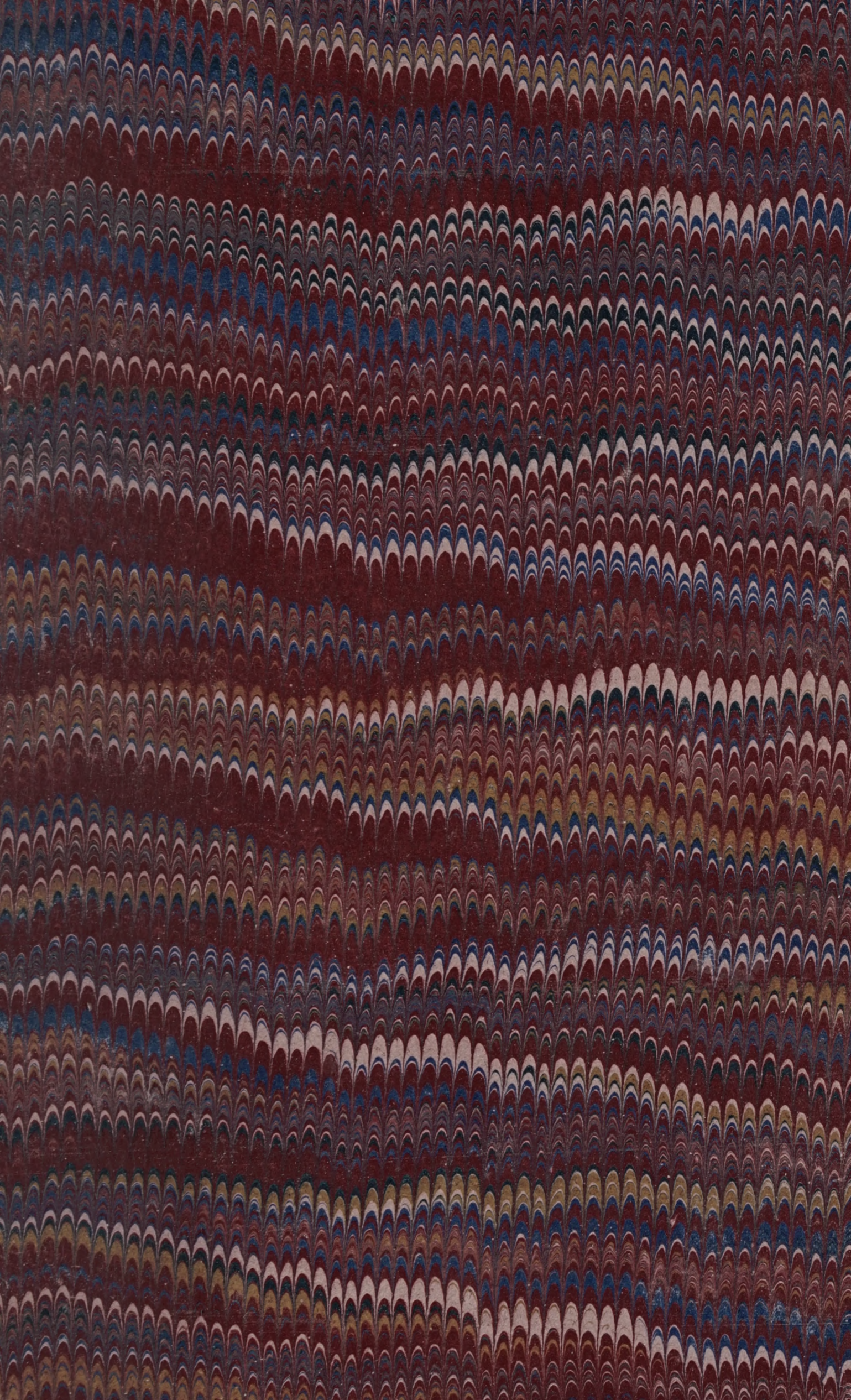


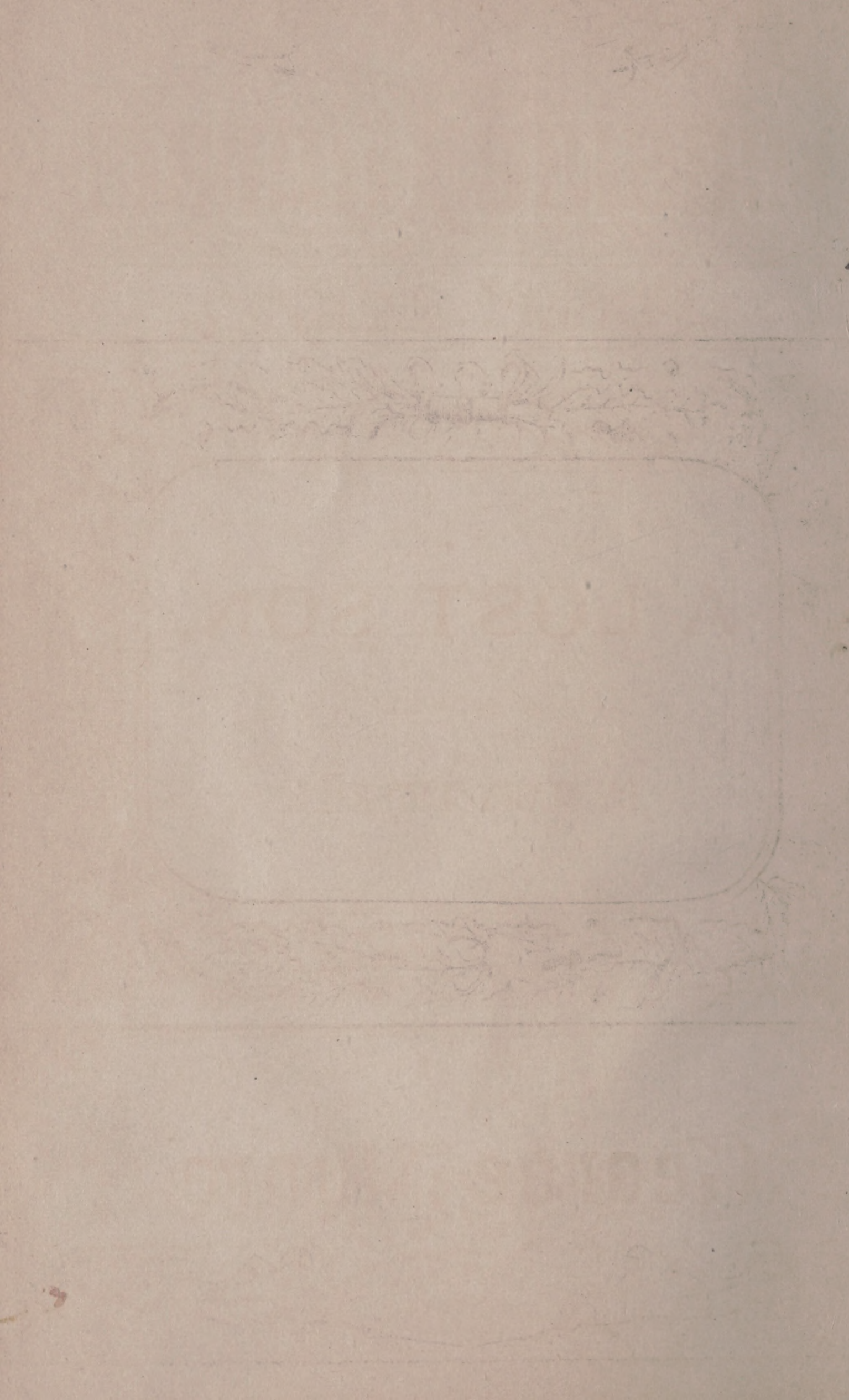
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A NOVEL.

BY MARY LINSKILL.

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"NEW YORK."

George Munro

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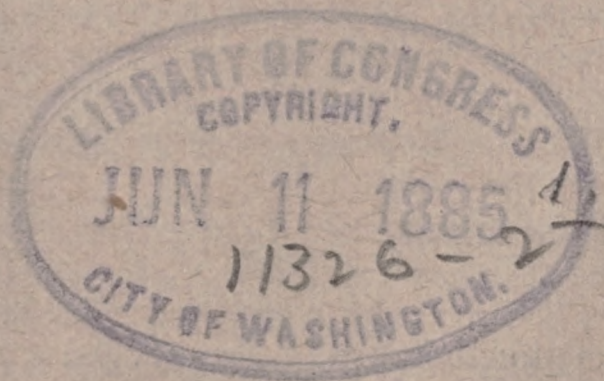
GEORGE MUNRO, Publisher,

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17 to 27 Vandewater Street, New York.

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✓
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• NEW YORK:
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A LOST SON

CHAPTER I

THE NEW COURT

The first of the new court was a young man of about twenty years of age, who had been educated at the University of Oxford, and who had spent some time in the army.

He was a very handsome man, with dark hair and eyes, and a very pleasant countenance.

He was very well educated, and was very fond of reading, and of writing.

He was very kind and generous, and was very popular with all who knew him.

He was very brave and courageous, and was very fond of fighting.

He was very loyal and devoted, and was very fond of his country.

He was very honest and upright, and was very fond of truth.

He was very kind and gentle, and was very fond of children.

He was very brave and courageous, and was very fond of fighting.

He was very loyal and devoted, and was very fond of his country.

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A LOST SON.

CHAPTER 1.

THE NEW COUSIN.

The liquid drops of tears that you have shed,
Shall come again, transform'd to orient pearl;
Advantaging their loan, with interest
Of ten-times double gain of happiness.

SHAKESPEARE: *King Richard III.*

THERE was no one but Martin Brooke and Ben Chadwick in the shop; the others—Joshua Serlcote, senior, his wife, and half a dozen sons and daughters, were all sitting round the tea-table in the back parlor. It was a narrow room and somewhat dim, but the Serlcotes were quite contented with it. They had a grand room over the shop, with a Brussels carpet and a good piano, and looking-glasses and china ornaments, and colored antimacassars in profusion; but this was only for visitors. Mrs. Serlcote would as soon have thought of taking her sewing into one of the big square pews of the parish church as of trying to make herself at home in her front parlor.

Her thin, sour, suspicious-looking face has more color than usual this afternoon, her black satin cap-ribbons flutter over the tea-tray, she grows confused over the sugar, and forgets that Julian, her eldest son, likes a double quantity of cream. Julian reminds her quietly, and she all but empties the cream-jug into his cup, a proceeding noticed by the others without a shade of discontent.

Even Elizabeth, who is eight years older than her brother, has no thought of doing anything but help to spoil him. It only seems natural to them all that Julian, who is so handsome and so gentleman-like, and so much admired everywhere, should be treated with practical admiration at home. Julian never appears to presume upon this feeling, but it is open to question whether they ever gave him a fair opportunity.

Even Joshua Serlcote, stiff, prim old martinet that he was, had a secret pride in this son of his. Joshua was a man well to do in the world. The well-stocked jeweler's shop in the Corn Market of Lyme-St.-Mary's had been established by his great-grandfather, and the Serlcotes had always held their heads higher than any other tradespeople in the somewhat exclusive little town; yet there was a line drawn, and he knew it, and he had never made any attempt to overstep it in his own person; but could not help exulting a little when Julian, *etat.* one-and-twenty, came back from a two years'

private

sojourn in London and Paris, and took his place on the other side of the line quite naturally.

Whitehouse, the principal lawyer; Dr. Sargent, who was the mayor that year, and Mark Oakley, who was the son of a rich brewer, knew quite well that young Serlcote had been away for what his father termed improvement, or, in other terms, that he had been giving his services in large establishments for the sake of gaining an extended knowledge of business; but it was also patent to them that he had gained knowledge of other things not connected with business, and that in consequence of this knowledge, and his mode of communicating it, he was decidedly an acquisition to the somewhat slow society of Lyme-St.-Mary's.

He had been at home about a year on this November afternoon, a year during which life had been made very pleasant to him. It was supposed that he was in the shop gradually learning to take his father's place, and occasionally during the forenoon he might be found there; but no stranger who saw him standing about chatting pleasantly and confidentially with people who hardly knew whether to regard themselves as customers or visitors, and who felt a certain delicacy in asking for anything they might happen to want, could possibly have supposed that his connection with trade was other than the pleasant fiction that Julian himself considered it to be.

If the afternoon was bright and tempting there was usually an outdoor engagement to be suddenly remembered—a drive in Whitehouse's wagonette, a boating expedition on the Trent with Oakley and his sisters; or in summer time a picnic or a cricket-match, or, what was more to his taste, a croquet party. Of his evenings he seldom had any account to give, but he had a latch-key, and often went in so late that there was no one to be interested in his accounts.

Of course there was business to be done in the shop, and Joshua Serlcote was quite the right man to see that it was neither left undone nor done badly. It was well for him, and he knew that it was well, that he had Martin Brooke to trust to. Martin was his wife's nephew—a homeless, penniless, unattractive lad of nineteen or thereabouts. The word "unattractive," however, had better be qualified at once. Martin had strong attractions for his quick-sighted uncle; steadiness, punctuality, a habit of silence, and other business-like qualities which were not too common, as Joshua knew.

It was quite possible that Martin had merits less stern and more graceful, but these had little chance of coming to the surface of that commonplace, monotonous life of his. And there was no one to look below the surface; hardly any to take a careful look at that. The lad had failings, but no one to excuse them. He had virtues, but seen through the depressing medium of indifference, they appeared very small.

Martin, like everybody else about the place, is in a state of expectancy this afternoon. It is not more than three weeks since Joshua Serlcote received a letter from a small town in Northumberland containing the news of his sister's death, and inclosing an appeal written by her to him only a few days before that event.

It was over twenty years since any communication had passed between them, but time had not frozen his memories of the kind, gentle girl, whose only unforgivable sin had been that she had chosen

to marry a poor man—an artist named Herbert Dyne, who, with no capital except his brains and his brush, had yet been courageous enough to take to himself a wife.

He had never repented, nor had she. They had suffered, but they had loved—loved with a love that would have made a harder life than theirs worth living. It was now about five years since his death. From that time until the beginning of her own last illness, Mrs. Dyne had supported herself and her daughter by keeping a school.

It was this daughter of Herbert and Elizabeth Dyne who was expected at No. 17 Corn Market, Lyme-St.-Mary's, in the county of Trentfordshire. All through the dull wintry day—nay, all through the week—a curious sense of anticipation had made itself felt, curious in many ways.

It may be said—sadly enough, if you think of it—that not one inmate of that house thought with any pleasure of the coming stranger; so completely a stranger that even her age had to be guessed. The dying mother had not thought of anything so unimportant as that when she had written to plead for a home for her child. That was the word she had used, “my child.” Later on in the letter she had called her Agnes, and Agnes herself had written one or two brief, quiet, simply-expressed notes to her uncle, who had imagined therefrom that she was probably some fifteen or sixteen years old. That was all that was known of her.

The household at No. 17 was in nowise a demonstrative one. Hardly any member of it knew the real opinion of another on this important matter. From the beginning the utmost reserve had been used. The four younger children—Fanny, Ellen, John, and Sam—had wondered, but only in whispers when they were alone, whether they would have to call the stranger “cousin.” Even Hannah, the talkative maid-servant, who had helped Miss Serlcote to prepare the room that was to be devoted to the use of the new inmate, had felt that discretion had to be used in asking questions. Perhaps it was because of this outward repression that the inner current of expectation had become so strong.

Probably Julian was troubled less than any one else by his anticipations. One thing was certain: she would not interfere with him in any way. His sisters had never interfered; why should she? It might be that she would prove an acquisition. If she should be very pretty, or musical, or lively, or even stylish-looking, an evening at home might seem less intolerably slow than such evenings had usually seemed hitherto. These and similar vague speculations had passed once or twice rapidly through his mind, but they had not been strong enough to prepare the way for disappointment.

Martin, being a young man of fewer external resources, had naturally given more time to internal surmisings. Imagine him standing there behind the long counter, a youth under twenty, rather short in figure, somewhat clumsily built, but well and carefully dressed. This was usual with him. It had not occurred to him to bestow any extra care on his dress because of the expected addition to his uncle's family. His hair, which was of that indefinite color which no one ever knows how to name, being neither light nor dark, nor brown nor red, was yet very nice hair in its way. It always

looked soft and bright and well cared for. His complexion was of a type not so difficult to classify, being decidedly a bad one, but his eyes went far to redeem any defect of that kind. If you had looked into Martin Brooke's eyes once you could hardly help wishing to look into them again. They were rather large, and of a bright blue-gray, but it was the expression, not the size nor the color, that attracted you. You saw a real human soul in them, and a gentle, kindly, unselfish soul it was, but somewhat sad withal, if you had sufficient acquaintance with sadness to be able to discern it in such an uninteresting person as the young man behind the counter of a jeweler's shop.

It was such a handsome shop that I need hardly apologize for taking the most exclusively high-bred reader into it. All round, from the floor to the lofty ceiling, there was a glitter of pretty things gold and silver, gilding, glass and polished mahogany; and all these things were reflected from such a number of cunningly-inserted mirrors that a sense of bewilderment was apt to seize certain of Mr. Serlcote's more countrified customers. They remembered the time when the business was conducted in a place about a quarter the size, the door of which had stood at the top of four steps. This, however, had been when Julian had been quite a little boy. Most of the improvements had been made since his return from Paris.

There was no flaring of gas. The further end of the shop was almost in darkness, and it was a very subdued light that descended upon the heads of Martin Brooke and Ben Chadwick. Ben was the younger apprentice, a lazy, mischievous, incomprehensible youth, who seemed to have been sent into the world for no other purpose than the inscrutable one of making Joshua Serlcote ceaselessly, unreasonably, and causelessly angry. If Ben spoke, or rather muttered, his muttering was an offense; silence was an offense still greater, and his smile was simply unpardonable. Joshua had been known more than once to turn red with anger because Ben blushed. Ben was not blushing for nothing. Some sense of hidden guilt was at the bottom of such impudence and shamefacedness as that.

Martin and Ben stood there, one on either side, quite silently. It was supposed that Ben was rubbing something with wash-leather; Martin was for once making no pretense of doing anything. His uncle and Julian had disappeared when the tea-table bell rang at five o'clock, agreeing as they went into the house that they would go up as far as the station together to meet the seven o'clock train. It would suit Julian's convenience to do so. The station was on the road to Buxton Grove, where he had an engagement for the evening.

There was no sound anywhere, within or without, when suddenly the rattle of wheels broke the silence. This was unusual in the Corn Market, especially after dark, so unusual that Martin felt a curious suggestion of palpitation, and even Ben's color changed to a dark crimson as he looked up. Nearer the sound came, and yet nearer, then it stopped, just outside. It was too late for a carriage customer. Martin flying forward decided hastily that the cabman was a fool for not knowing where the private entrance was. He looked rather desperate as he flung the shop door wide open, but he edged himself behind it very deferentially, not to say timidly. A

tall young lady in deep mourning entered, lifted a heavy black veil, and looked round with an appealing, bewildered look that restored Martin's presence of mind at once.

"Come this way," he said.

The words seemed brusque, but his tone was impressively gentle. Just as he spoke the glass door at the other end of the shop was opened. Martin led the way; the girl followed, shrinking, blushing more deeply at every step. Who were all these strange people? They were filing in one by one, arranging themselves in a stiff awkward row. Old Joshua stood at the top in a broad black satin stock that seemed to keep his head as high as he could possibly wish it to be kept; his gray hair brushed out imposingly, his whole presence and bearing proclaiming his life-long sense of irreproachableness.

Julian came next; Martin had slipped a little behind; John and Ben Chadwick were staring at her from the corner of the desk. There were only five altogether, but they seemed like fifteen for a moment: and the moment was of quite indefinite length and intensity.

So intense it was and so bewildering that when Julian stepped out with courteous presence from the little group she looked up to him in a timid graceful way that added a new element to his first feeling of surprise.

There had been no time for thought, but "quick as thought" is not the best comparison that could be made; there are quicker mental processes than thinking. Julian himself could not have told how it was that he came to be so much surprised by that first sweet deprecating smile. But somehow he felt that a dark stately beautiful girl like this cousin of his might have met him coldly and proudly without upsetting his notions of feminine ways in the least.

"I am sorry that there was no one at the station to meet you, but we thought you had intended to come by a later train," he said, speaking with a certain shy grace.

Mr. Serlcote said nearly the same thing without knowing it. The old man was rubbing his hands quite nervously, and there was a break in his voice that made Ben think he must be even angrier than usual.

Then Julian and his father led the way into the house. There was only a narrow passage to cross. Elizabeth Serlcote, a fair blue-eyed young woman of thirty, with an amicable smile and an honest homely expression, was standing by the parlor door too uncertain to venture further. Behind her stood Fanny and Ellen, two bright-looking but much-subdued girls of sixteen and fourteen; small, white-haired, pale-eyed Sam, aged ten, was still further in the background. John, a boy of similar appearance but two years older, had remained in the shop with Ben Chadwick.

Tea was still on the table. Mrs. Serlcote rose from her chair behind the teacups, and added her formal greeting to the rest. Julian had quite perception enough to feel that the atmosphere to which he was so much accustomed himself must strike this gentle-looking stranger with a sense of stiffness and coldness. It rather distressed him and incited him to efforts that his mother and sister noted with a little wonder.

Presently Agnes went upstairs with Elizabeth, and Julian re-

mained in the sitting-room until she reappeared. It was pleasant for the younger ones to have him there. He was not one of them, he was above them and far away from them in other things than years, and these good but commonplace little things knew it; but they also knew that he was always kind to them, always had a smile and a playful word. His condescension was the one pleasant thing in their lives. Perhaps condescension is a hard word; certainly Julian's brothers and sisters would not have used it. They loved him with that rare young love that believes in return without any question.

He was, however, less vivacious than usual this evening. His agreeable surprise was working in his brain, awakening an amount of curiosity that was not likely to be soon satisfied.

If he had thought his cousin's appearance striking and beautiful while she was still in her traveling-dress, it was not probable that he would have any reason for changing his opinion when she re-entered the room, divested of her heavy wraps and refreshed by change of toilet. He had seen grace before, he had worshiped beauty, he had been affected by transient glimpses of human goodness, but he had never been touched as he knew that he was touched now.

He could not have told you whether she had any special charm. He saw that her figure was slight and graceful, that her dark, bright, undulating hair was coiled at the back of a small, well-shaped head, that the pale oval face was redeemed from colorlessness by crimson lips of fine curve and rich lustrous black eyes that were if anything a little too large, but he knew that the power that had arrested him lay in none of these things.

Where did it lie?

He did not ask himself the question as he sauntered out through the kitchen to a large space behind the house that one would hardly know whether to call yard or garden. It was a curious place to find in the middle of a town like Lyme-St.-Mary's and behind a shop. There was a high brick wall with a stone coping all round it, but you could only see the bricks here and there between the luxuriant masses of ivy, broad-leaved shining ivy that glittered in the light of the young moon that was well-nigh overhead. There were narrow flower borders all round, but in place of turf or gravel walks were damp green paving-stones. At one end an old fountain kept up a perpetual trickling over a few unhappy-looking ferns.

You could hardly call it a pleasant place, unless you happened to be in a very pleasant mood; but it was quaint and silent, and afforded a sense of breathing space that was very refreshing to dwellers in a street.

Julian walked up and down a few times. It could hardly be said that he was thinking—hardly even that he was feeling. Had his experience been less or his ignorance more he might have fancied that he had fallen or was falling in love, but this idea did not occur to him.

Julian Serlcote, weak, pleasure-loving, self-indulgent young man that he was, had yet capacity for being strangely attracted by whatsoever of truth, purity or spiritual loveliness might come in his

way. His knees were not yet so stiffened into brass that worship was impossible.

His devotion might be of the vaguest nature, but perhaps a little pity might be mingled with blame for this. He had never come into close contact with virtue much higher than his own. Whatever yearning after better things there might have been in him had been allowed to lie dormant so long that he had ceased to suspect its existence. He had been stirred to-night, and he knew that he had, and he accepted the knowledge without impatience.

The remembrance that he had promised to spend the evening with Whitehouse came upon him rather unpleasantly; he even felt his face, which was very fair and delicate, grow hot over the thought. For once he almost wished that he had not been quite so intimate with this cynical clever friend of his. Perhaps it would be possible to withdraw a little.

So he dreamed as he walked up and down over the mossy stones. It was a mild evening, the moonlight fell softly, the stars seemed to shine out of the past, out of his younger and purer days.

But he was young yet, he reminded himself, barely two-and-twenty; and if he could never be innocent again—well, he need not stain his soul more deeply than it was stained already.

He was thinking now to good purpose, and his thought presented a graphic Bible-picture, a picture of a man who was rich and a sinner, and who not only repented but made restitution, and this mainly because he was moved thereto by the sight of a Holy Face, by the sound of a Holy Voice; in a word, by the power of goodness to communicate itself. There had been no rebuke, not even remonstrance; but indeed unlooked-for friendliness, unexpected kindness.

This man Zacchæus had repented. Julian knew but very little of repentance. He was in the habit of going to church on a Sunday morning, his father's wish being the main motive for the uncharacteristic proceeding, but he knew that he was not much the better nor much the wiser for going there. He very seldom listened to the sermon, or even pretended to listen. Now for one moment, though he hardly knew it, there was thirst in his soul, a desire to begin life afresh on new and higher terms.

Nevertheless he must keep his engagement at Whitehouse's handsome villa in Buxton Grove. Before he went, he returned to the sitting-room to say "good-night." He should not be late, he said; it was his usual phrase on going out, and for once he meant it.

He lingered about in a curious way before going. Agnes was resting in an old crimson-covered easy-chair. Her pale sweet face, her dark bright hair and eyes, seemed to strike him as something more vividly new and fresh every time he looked at them. He wished she would talk more. Hitherto she had only answered when any one spoke, but her answers were made in such a low, pleasant voice, and with such a winning smile on her lips and in her eyes, that he could not help waiting about in the hope of extracting from her more than response. But perhaps she was tired; or it might be that her grief was too new and strong for ordinary conversation.

His walk that evening was a pleasant one. He recalled things that he had hardly seemed to note at the time. Until he found him-

self no longer alone he had no thought save thought of his new cousin.

CHAPTER II.

"THE WILD ROSE BLOSSOMS FAIR."

Love took up the glass of time and turned it in his glowing hands,
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.
Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all the chords with might;
Smote the chord of Self, that trembling passed in music out of sight.

LOCKSLEY HALL.

AND what of this cousin herself? In all this stir of change and new impression, was she quite unstirred? Was she really as calm and placid as her smile seemed to betoken? Was the soul within her as unmoved as she herself appeared to be?

We all know the story of Elaine! we have most of us been struck into a certain sadness of mood by its pure simple truthfulness. The noble knight had not yet stepped with all grace into that rude hall, when the guileless maiden, without one thought of sin, or sorrow, or shame,

"Lifted up her eyes
And loved him with that love which was her doom."

Read how we will, no thought of improbability strikes us here. The maiden was all unused to love and ways of love. The strange knight, with his mellow voice, his courtly ways, his touch of melancholy, might well seem to her the goodliest man that "ever among ladies ate in hall," and noblest; and, seeing this, it was small wonder that all night long his face should live before her, and that when the morning dawned her heart's secret should blaze itself in the heart's colors on her simple face. No sense of suddenness jars upon us as we read; none of unmaidenliness.

Nor is it probable that any such sense jarred upon the maiden herself. Certainly this Elaine of ours felt none, neither had she any sorrow or fear or dismay of any kind. Her only feeling was a nameless and indefinite one of joy. Some good thing had happened to her. When she sat alone in her own room at night she sat wonderingly, but altogether peacefully: even her great sorrow for the dead was subdued and quiet within her. Her grief had never—save for one day, the day of the funeral—been of a wild and uncontrollable nature. The cross of bereavement was heavy. She was but a girl—hardly yet nineteen—inexperienced, and almost alone in the world, for the far-off uncle and cousins were only names to her then, and the sense of helplessness and forlornness strikes very chill to a heart like hers.

The fact that her mother had died was not in itself a bitter one. Mrs. Dyne had been very tired, and not sorry when time for rest had come. Death had no sting for the one that was taken, nor any terror for the one that was left. The pain of separation was deep and ceaseless, and it had seemed to Agnes that it never could be any other until that day when there shall be no more pain. But although she had shed tears secretly and sadly, they had not been un-submissive tears.

Before coming to Lyme-St.-Mary's she had done what she could to nerve herself for the first few days of strangeness and dependence—for she was altogether dependent on the bounty of Joshua Serlcote. Some thought she had that, if no work were found for her to do in her uncle's house, work might be found elsewhere—perhaps in a school. She could not be idle, and she had never had proof

“How savoreth of salt
The bread of others, and how hard a road
The going down and up another's stair.”*

Now already change had passed “over the spirit of her dream,” the grand change that comes but once into any life. The thought of leaving her uncle's house came to her like a sudden pain, and she made haste to put it away from her. There was no more any feeling of strangeness. The days came and went, each one bringing some touch of hope or joy or promise, each one moving her to a new and glad surprise that life should be so rich, so beautiful, and yet so calm and quiet. Ah! she would never again dread any change, or any coming event that might throw shadows before. She would remember the tears she had shed in the railway carriage as she came to Lyme-St.-Mary's; she would never forget how the shower had come before the sunshine.

There is something that it is no misuse of language to call sacred about the birth of true, pure love in the heart of any good man or woman. No levity of thought or word is possible. Such, coming from another person, strikes with a painful jar.

This jarring element was perceptible not seldom during the first few weeks of Agnes Dyne's life at the house in the Corn Market. When or how she had betrayed her secret she did not know, but it was a secret no longer. The ways of the people about her were not as her ways, nor as the ways of her mother had been. Agnes could hardly doubt that Julian's love had grown at least as rapidly as her own. There was reason why doubt was not possible, but he had not yet spoken openly, nor was she anxious that he should. She was already happy—quietly happy in this sense of a new and warm affection; but that others should see it and jest over it before it was securely hers seemed strange and cruel.

Perhaps there was a not altogether unsatisfactory side to the matter. No one disapproved; rather it seemed that they were inclined to approve too prematurely. Elizabeth could hardly remember the time when her father had been in such good temper and spirits; and Martin Brooke, who was quite aware how matters were tending, had much ado to repress himself when Ben Chadwick winked to him knowingly from behind the opposite counter. But let Ben be forgiven; it was almost his only mode of adequate expression; and it must be conceded that there was much to be expressed in those days. There was the singular and not-to-be-defined improvement in Julian Serlcote himself; there was the presence of the beautiful stranger, who made such a difference in the house, and whose smile and kind word Ben would have run a mile to win any day; and more than all this, there was the change in old Joshua. It cer-

* Dante.

tainly was amusing to see the tall, thin, upright old man, walking up and down his shop with that military gait of his, rubbing his hands approvingly, smiling to himself, uttering half words and ejaculations of satisfaction, then overhearing his own voice and turning to speak sharply to Ben as a natural consequence.

Perhaps no one understood it all better than Martin Brooke. Martin had lately acquired a habit of looking out into the market-place, with a more than usually sad look in those blue-gray eyes of his.

Looking out one December morning not much more than a month after Agnes' arrival, he saw two tall figures cross the street. The taller one was Julian, looking, Martin thought, more like a prince than a shopkeeper. He certainly was a fine-looking man, and had an air about him that was considered quite one of distinction by the inhabitants of Lyme-St.-Mary's.

Julian Serlcote never passed along the streets unnoticed. His straight well-built figure, perhaps somewhat straighter since he had become a captain of volunteers, would have commanded attention anywhere. He was very fair, with a smooth delicacy of complexion that might have given him a girlish look but for his abundant whiskers and soft yellow mustache. He had gray eyes, mild affectionate gray eyes, that

“Seemed to love whate'er they looked upon.”

No one was ever known to wonder at his popularity.

Of course Martin did not wonder, nor did he even envy him; that feeling was kept back, not so much by the high hand he held over himself, as by the love he had for his cousin, the pride he felt in him.

Yet it must be owned that something shook him as Julian and Agnes passed by together on this particular morning. He did not know what it was, he never knew. They were not talking, hardly looking at each other, but there was something in the face of each that drove Martin away from the shop window, finally from the shop altogether.

That day a battle was fought under Joshua Serlcote's roof, one that Joshua never dreamed of. There might be no victory to speak of, but there was a hard struggle for it.

Julian and Agnes going out for the first walk they had taken alone, had no thought of any suffering young man behind the counter of the shop in the Corn Market; each was stirred with a multitude of thoughts, but Martin had no share in them.

It was a bright morning for December, sunny, still, and almost warm. It was nearly Christmas now. The shops were gayly decorated, there were more people than usual in the streets and lanes, people with brighter faces and more intent ways than were generally observable in the neighborhood of Lyme-St.-Mary's. It was a pleasant day to be out if even there had been nothing special to make it pleasant.

Probably Julian Serlcote had no very particular intentions when he asked his cousin to take a walk with him that morning. She had come down to breakfast looking even brighter and prettier than usual; and a sudden thought had crossed his mind that it would be very satisfactory to be seen walking by her side in the Grove Road.

That was the fashionable promenade, and Julian knew that, though there might not be many there to envy him his companion, there would certainly be a few to envy Agnes hers. He was not behind any man of his years in capacity for estimating his own value as a desirable *parti*.

He had given the invitation rather lightly, but he saw with some pleasure that it was not so lightly accepted.

He noted Agnes' blush and shy grace of manner with a certain feeling of self-congratulation. Mrs. Serlcote was watching them both.

"It seems to me that you are two very sly young people," she said, prefacing her remark with a silly broken laugh. "But don't think that I can't see what's going on," she continued, shaking her head with a feigned disapproval meant to be highly humorous.

Agnes looked up, only half comprehending, but blushing far more deeply than before. Would she ever learn to understand this aunt of hers? Julian colored with annoyance, but he made no reply. Experience had taught him the wisdom of accepting much of his mother's unwisdom in utter silence.

Still the remark helped to strengthen the consciousness that already existed in those two minds. Julian was sorry for Agnes, and his sorrow expressed itself in a new tenderness of tone and manner. It was strange how every unimportant little thing that had happened had helped to draw them together. Julian was half surprised when he found himself caring so much for his cousin's opinion, thinking of her comfort, her wishes, her happiness, her peace of mind. This was altogether a different matter from flirting with that brilliant young person, Arminelle Oakley. "Flirting?" He was quite sure that was the right word. The matter had gone no further than that, and it should never go so far again.

Nevertheless, it could hardly be said that he was very sorry to see the Miss Oakleys approaching. He had always thought them fine women. They were large, highly-colored, richly-dressed, and of the haughtiest bearing. Julian's vanity had been flattered by his intimacy with them, but somehow he did not feel so proud of them this morning. He caught the curious glance of one, the disdainful smile of the other, and he passed on merely raising his hat. He could not introduce his cousin. He felt more strongly than ever her real superiority to these and other women of his acquaintance.

The wavering state of mind in which he had been since the first evening of Agnes' arrival had not been very distasteful to him. He had not been slow to perceive that she was moved by something more than mere gratitude for his various little kindnesses, and it pleased him to think that whenever he should cease to waver himself, he was not likely to be subjected to any further uncertainty. On the whole, though he acknowledged to himself now that he was very much in love, he was rather afraid that the one grand event of his life's history was going to unfold itself rather tamely. If only Agnes had been a little less natural and simple-minded, a little more arch and diplomatic, or if even his father had not been so openly satisfied, it is probable that Julian would have been more in earnest. Of course he did not acknowledge all this to himself, and on two or

three recent occasions he had felt a certain amount of blissful impatience to have what he termed his "fate" settled.

At other times he had had misgivings, and serious ones. A jest tainted with irreverence, a grave sin spoken of lightly, an unkind or uncharitable criticism, would bring a look of sadness to Agnes' face that made Julian in his ordinary mood look somewhat dubiously toward a future passed entirely by her side. He would have to give up something—doubtless more than he liked to acknowledge even now; but, all the same, it would be a very appalling thing for a man of his temperament to be bound to a wife whose views might become more ascetic as the years went on. He was not quite clear as to what he meant by "asceticism," but he was pleased with the word.

Thus it will be seen that the young man, like most other human beings, had two selves. That first sight of Agnes' face had awakened his higher and better self as it had not been awakened for years, but it had been as the lighting of a lamp that could not burn steadily for want of oil. Now it shot up brightly, now it died down—vanished almost out of sight.

Still, he had decided pretty firmly in his own mind that he should ask Agnes to be his wife on some not very far distant day; but he had a vague notion floating in his head that he should like the matter to be brought to a crisis by some event or other that should relieve his soul of the sense of tameness. Various thin schemes occurred to him; he would go away, and find out from that stolid but loving elder sister of his how Agnes bore his absence; or he would take the first opportunity of flirting with some one else in her presence, and then confess the purpose that his wickedness had had in it.

But he did none of these things; instead, he walked by the side of a broad, still river, with low banks and gliding barges, and towing-paths all along its margin from one town to another. There was a long low line of distant hills, blue and hazy, the smoke of a far-off town floated beyond the brown-gray woods. On the opposite side of the river miles of flat green pasture-land stretched away into the distance, dotted with village spires and groups of trees. Everywhere the mild, warm sun was shining, lighting up the river, throwing picturesque gray shadows. It was the dreamiest and pleasantest of winter days.

"Did you think it strange my asking you to come out for a walk this morning?" Julian asked, after a time of silence.

His tone was tender.

Agnes, looking up, met his eyes, and they were full of tender meaning also.

"I thought it was very kind," she said, softly. "I am so glad to be out of doors, away from the town."

"Did you walk much when you were at home?"

"Yes, every day; mother used to insist on it."

Julian heard the slight change of tone, noted the touch of sadness.

"Then I shall insist," he said, speaking with a half playful authoritativeness.

A soft pink blush suffused Agnes' face, her large dark eyes drooped sadly. Julian did not see that they were full of tears, he

only saw that the smile on her lips was a little sad, and that she was struggling with embarrassment.

"You mustn't think that no one cares for you," he went on, drawing a little closer to her, and speaking in lower accents than before. "I know what it is to be a stranger in a strange land. There is nothing I would not do to save you from such suffering as I have known myself."

Agnes looked up astonished, ready to smile with surprise. Julian suffering! Then the thought came: "But how else could he have learned such sympathy—such precious sympathy as this that was making her heart beat now?"

"But I don't feel that I am uncared for," she said. "You have been so kind—you and my uncle and all of you. Have I seemed indifferent or ungrateful?"

"No, certainly not; but I was not meaning that kind of caring—that general affection that you could not help winning wherever you went."

What then was he meaning? Was it coming true, that wild sweet dream—her first dream—her last? Beautiful she had always been, but she stood like one transfigured to a new and higher beauty now. They had sauntered on to where the river rippled through the arches of the old gray bridge at Elmthorpe. Julian took her hand in his as they stood by the parapet. She did not withdraw it, nor turn away her face. The moment was too solemn for the littleness of coquetry, even had the skill to practice it been hers.

No. "He had not dreamed she was so beautiful," and to see her standing there "rapt on his face," as if he were some noble being, worthy not only of her love, but of her reverence and devotion, caused him a moment of vague, undefined pain. Neither knew how long the silence had lasted when it was broken.

"I was not thinking of that kind of affection," Julian said; "it can never content *you*—it can never content me again. I feel now how true it is that

"The love of all
Is but a small thing to the love of one."

Then he stopped a moment, the sudden strengthening of his own emotion compelling him.

"If I could have the love of the whole world, Agnes, it would be nothing to me if I could not have yours."

Her only answer was the word that was pressing on his own heart for utterance. It was spoken with effort and after a long pause,

"I am not worthy to be loved with such a love as this," she said.

* * * * *

So passed one of the great crises of Julian Serlcote's history—perhaps the greatest of all. For many days after that day by the River Trent he could hardly realize his own exceeding great happiness. Pleasures and joys of a certain stamp had been his before, and he had usually looked upon himself as a very deserving recipient of anything of that kind that might come in his way. Troubles, or rather annoyances, had been apt to move him to a certain surprise.

Now his first instinct was to walk a little carefully. There was even reverence enough in him to be afraid of the intoxication that

threatened to supervene. Congratulations were poured in upon him from all sides, sincere and insincere, the latter the loudest.

Perhaps none of them touched him so much as his father's satisfaction, which he did not quite understand until more than a week had passed away; then late one evening—New Year's Eve it was—after they had been sitting alone for a time, discussing the future—Julian's future, and Agnes'—the old man suddenly put down the long clay pipe, which was his sole form of self-indulgence, and turning his head away, Julian saw with distress that tears were dropping slowly over his father's face.

The son was not by nature much more demonstrative than the father, yet tenderness of heart was not wanting in either. Julian put his cigar aside instantly, and involuntarily laid one hand softly on the old man's shoulder.

"For pity's sake, don't let these things trouble you!" he said, with much emotion. "There is no need even to think of any change for a while. We can wait, we wish to wait, and when the change does come it need not make much difference to you. You will always be master here."

"No, no, my boy, it is not that," Joshua said, with some difficulty, "it is not that. I should like to go. I should like to live a little way in the country, to end my days among green fields; I have always thought I should like that. No, it is other things that overcome me."

"Then try not to think of them, father."

"I can't help it, Julian; I can't help it. I am getting old, and the past is more to an old man than the present or the future. There are things in the past that pain me, that I thought would pain me on to the end, but if you marry Agnes and behave kindly to her I think they will not trouble me so much. I loved her mother more than she knew, but because she wouldn't do as I wished her to do I steeled myself against her, hardened my own heart so long that when I wanted to relent I couldn't. Even when her husband died, and I knew that she was suffering poverty as well as grief, I could not bend my pride to help her, except secretly. She never knew that I helped her, that I should have been glad if a reconciliation could have been forced upon me. But all that is gone, Julian. You can help to atone for your father's sin."

"It will be a very pleasant way of making atonement," said Julian, smiling; "and as to my behaving kindly to Agnes, I think it would be impossible for any one to behave unkindly to her. I look upon her coming here as the luckiest thing that has happened in my life yet."

"I trust it will prove so, Julian," the old man said, rather anxiously, certain uneasy memories troubling him somewhat. "I trust it will prove so. It should make you a little steadier; don't you think so, my boy?"

Julian's face colored a little. For a moment he half resented the idea that improvement was possible in him, but only for a moment. His better self was in the ascendant.

"Father, I am trying to turn over a new leaf," he said. That was all, but there was a certain boyish quiver in his voice that seemed to preclude further conversation.

Years afterward Julian Serlcote remembered that New Year's Eve by his father's fire, the parting shake of the hand, and the blessing that had never seemed to bless him.

CHAPTER III.

THE TOUCH OF CHANGE.

I foresee, and I could foretell
Thy future portion sure and well,
But those passionate eyes speak true, speak true,
And let them say what thou shalt do.

ROBERT BROWNING.

THAT sweet spring time was a very happy time at the jeweler's shop in the Corn Market. If anybody about the place refused to be happy it was only Martin, and no one knew anything about his refusal. Agnes thought him very silent, very stern at times; if even he did any little kindness for her—and he never lost an opportunity of doing one—his manner of doing it was often quite inexplicable. If he placed a chair or opened a door he would compress his lips and knit his brows most ferociously, while she thanked him, looking into his face with one of her sweet smiles. Martin generally walked off swinging his arms defiantly, or, if his temper was worse than usual, humming to himself some air or other, but producing a most dreadful timeless and tuneless noise. No one could say that the young man's behavior was good.

Still he did his work faithfully, his own and greater part of Julian's besides. Julian did not find it easy to turn over that new leaf of which he had spoken, and it was not to be expected of him that he should persist in doing anything that was difficult or distasteful. This was the grand noon of his life; why should he shadow it by vexing his own soul needlessly?

Therefore he still went on his way much as he had done before, and a most social and buoyant way it was. He had hardly appreciated it properly until he had made some feeble struggles against the temptations it held, temptations of which they knew nothing in that "slow" old-fashioned home of his.

Nothing was known of him there that could be openly objected to. It might be that in more than one heart there was a vague feeling of anxiety about him, but this could only be in his absence. When he was present he seemed to bring love with him and admiration and satisfaction.

If any charge could be brought against him substantial enough to be put into words it was the charge of idleness; but even Agnes wondered at her own temerity in making it.

Julian smiled his pleasantest, easiest smile.

"Well, I'm afraid you're about right there," he said, speaking as if he was rather complimented than otherwise. "I begin to think that I am naturally lazy. I'm certainly getting to hate work more than I used to do."

Agnes looked grave and turned paler than usual as he spoke. Work of some kind was a condition of life to her, and a sacred condition. Since Christmas she had undertaken the education of

Fanny and Ellen, and it was a greater undertaking than anybody about her knew. Mr Serlcote was grateful to her; she had not liked the school the children had attended before, but she had no real idea of the work which was being done in her best parlor during these sunny forenoons. Yet the feeling that something was being done for her and her children helped a good deal to sweeten her sour thin nature. She had accepted the idea of Agnes as her Julian's future wife, because her Julian had so decreed, but not without a whisper of disappointment to her eldest daughter.

"Moving in such society as he does, I think he might have looked a little higher," she said.

But Elizabeth, who was short and square and in no wise beautiful, looked upon her tall, beautiful, graceful cousin as quite enough of a princess even for her princely brother. And underlying this admiration there was a firmly-growing affection. Elizabeth was by nature a motherly woman, Agnes by nature and circumstances one who could appreciate to the full a motherly friend.

As the days went on there came to be a certain reticence between them about Julian, an unacknowledged, because almost groundless, reticence. There was no doubt of his love. Seeing that Agnes was so securely his, it was not to be expected of him that he should desire to be assured of that fact at least sixteen times a day, as had been the case in the beginning of their engagement.

Their affection for each other was a quiet certainty now, not a thing to need demonstration.

If Agnes was a little surprised that this state of things came to pass so soon, her surprise must be forgiven to her. She was young, over-earnest in all that she did or felt, and utterly inexperienced. Besides, be it noted that she kept such surprise altogether to herself. Once reading "Dora" to herself one evening when Julian was out, she paused awhile as she read of how William had failed to love his cousin—

"Because
He had been always with her in the house."

Was it, then, possible that people could see too much of each other? The idea remained with her, weighed upon her, finally wrought into her mind, so that she kept out of Julian's way somewhat more than she had done. This was the one artifice that she used, and it was quite harmless. Julian never discovered that she had made any change.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. TALBOT.

And oh! how much I loved him, what can tell?
Not words, nor tears. Heaven only knows how much;
And every evening when I say my prayers,
I pray to be forgiven for the sin
Of loving aught on earth with such a love.

SIR HENRY TAYLOR: *Philip Van Artevelde.*

"AND because they had no root they withered away."

That was Dr. Deane's text one summer Sunday morning. Joshua Serlcote's pew was far away up in the west gallery, close to the

organ and the choir. The roof was just overhead, the old oak rafters seeming to shut out light and air and sun—everything, in fact, but dust and dirt. A dingier, more unwholesome, more distracting place wherein to pray and praise could never have been conceived. Yet the old square pew was almost always full. Joshua and his wife sat by preference with their backs to the pulpit, which was somewhere in the dim east, and had a large, dusky-looking stained-glass window behind it; the four younger children sat in a prim row opposite. Elizabeth and Martin had latterly occupied the seat by the door, so that Julian and Agnes might sit near each other at the opposite end.

But this morning Agnes was sitting there alone, and it was not the first time that this had happened. Julian had been subject to headaches, and he could trace them to other causes than "sitting for so many hours on a Sunday in that stuffy old organ-loft." Agnes had offered to sit with him elsewhere, but her offer had somehow or another been evaded. Was it his absence only that made her look so sad? Was it fancy that made old Joshua's face seem more stern and grave than usual?

"Because they had no root they withered away." The words seemed to ring through the aisles like a denunciation. Over and over they came in the sermon as a conclusion to solemn warnings, to affectionate entreaties, to passionate appeals. Joshua Serlcote stirred in his seat uneasily; Agnes sat hushed, almost breathless. It was sad work, sadder for certain shortcomings of her own.

"Withering away." Yes, we see the process going on on every side of us—souls withering under the deadly chills of indifference, perishing under the deadlier blight of sin—and we make no effort, or only the most miserable effort, enough to satisfy our own most miserable conscience.

It seemed to Agnes possible to make any, the most desperate, effort as she sat there: but when the moment came for conscious exertion there were both pain and difficulty in it.

Julian seemed to be more unlike himself than ever that Sunday afternoon. He had taken even more pains than usual with his appearance; there was a certain air of extra neatness and trimness about him. This was for her sake, Agnes did not doubt. Of course he would ask her, as he always did, if she were not ready for the long pleasant walk that had grown into a pleasant custom.

But he did not ask her; he sat in the drawing-room with a book in his hand which she could see that he was not reading; and there was something in his face and in his attitude that made her heart beat quicker than it should have done as she went up to him.

She took out her watch and held it playfully before his eyes. Julian looked at it stolidly; not a muscle of his white, handsome, clear-cut face moved as he uttered the monosyllable

"Well?"

"Do you see the time?"

"I hope so."

"Do you know why I wish you to see it?"

An uneasy little frown passed momentarily over his face. He had his own plan for spending the afternoon, and he had not ex-

pected any difficulty of this kind. But he was not a man to trouble himself uneasily.

"I can't say what special reason you may have," he replied, speaking in the same impassive tone as before.

"Then I must tell you," Agnes said, still smiling, and speaking with a certain half playful sweetness. "I want you to take me to Elmthorpe this afternoon to the church. The service is at three o'clock."

Julian colored and hesitated. His voice was smoother and more courteous when he spoke again.

"I am afraid you will have to wait till another Sunday, Agnes, dear," he said. "I'm awfully sorry, but the fact is I have an engagement."

"An engagement for to-day?"

"Yes, you little Puritan. I hope I shall live to see you holding a regular *levee* every Sunday afternoon."

He was speaking flippantly now, almost defiantly. Agnes' thoughts were turning back upon the words that had so stirred her in the morning.

She sat down on a stool almost at Julian's feet, clasping her hands lightly on her black dress, looking up into his face with a smile that might have touched him had he been in a less unapproachable mood.

"Julian," she said, "you know you do not think me a Puritan; you have even said that you wondered to find me so little Puritanical. And I know there are engagements and engagements—some that one might keep on a Sunday without fear of wrong-doing. Would you mind telling me where you are going to-day? If you think that I ought not to have asked you, say so, and I won't press you for an answer."

"I *do* think you ought not to have asked me, but I don't mind answering you in the very least. I am going to Mrs. Talbot's; she is 'at home' this afternoon. I promised her I would look in."

Agnes was silent; there was much to be thought about. Julian had introduced her to Mrs. and Miss Talbot—a widowed lady and her daughter, who had lately come to live in Buxton Grove, and Mrs. Talbot had shown herself gentle and friendly, but Agnes was not quite sure that there could ever be much sympathy between them. The feeling—or rather the instinct—that she had in the matter was very vague, very intangible, but Julian had perceived it, and made it tangible at once.

Helena Talbot was still a handsome and attractive woman; her daughter Lerna, aged seventeen, promised to be quite as handsome; therefore it was not wonderful that Agnes should fail to look kindly upon them as his friends.

So it was that Julian said, not without some satisfaction, "I am going to Mrs. Talbot's; she is 'at home' to-day."

The idea of a reception of this kind on a Sunday was as new to Agnes as it was to the inhabitants of Lyme-St.-Mary's generally. Julian had a notion that she would be "rather shocked," as he put it to himself. She was certainly saddened.

"I know very little about things of this kind," she said, "nor how far people may be prepared to defend them, but I think it is a

pity that a Christian should do anything to need defense from such a standpoint as that."

Julian smiled superciliously. "Oh, I don't expect you to approve of anything Mrs. Talbot may do; her notions and yours will never fit. She is the least narrow-minded of any woman I have known."

"I was not thinking of Mrs. Talbot, Julian; I was thinking of you. There is only one Sunday in the week—only one day wherein to feel a little safer from distraction—a little more separate from the world, so that one's heart

" ' May deeply take and strongly keep
The print of heaven.' "

"You are a dear, good little creature," Julian said, rising from his chair with an ill-suppressed yawn. "I wish I were half as good as you: and if you don't worry me, perhaps I may take you to Elmtree Church next Sunday."

Then he went out, less satisfied with himself than he seemed to be—in fact, hardly satisfied at all. It was in his mind once, as he went up the quiet, deserted-looking Corn Market, to go back, to lay before that future wife of his certain struggles that he had had, certain misgivings that beset him, certain miserable gnawings of conscience, but he kept on his way until the desire had left him.

Yet, believe the best of him; he half hated himself for the mood that he had been in during the past hour, though it had been more a feigned mood than a real one; and he acknowledged to himself in all sincerity that he was growing even less worthy of his cousin and her love than he had been before.

If he *had* gone back he might have been moved even deeper still; he might have found Agnes Dyne on her knees and in tears; he, who prayed so little for himself, might all the rest of his life have remembered hearing another pray so earnestly for him,

" But of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are those—' It might have been.' "

Yes, believe the best of him, and pity him. He was weak, and he knew it; his temptations were strong, and he knew it not.

How should he know? He had never in his life looked a temptation in the face determined to resist it.

Temptation!—if you could but look at that. A power of darkness, strong, subtle, unsleeping; leaving no point unassailed; harassing the watchfullest Christian most, succeeding best where he thought himself the strongest; harassing not at all the unwatchful, but making what havoc can be made in the strictest silence.

You remember that pathetic line in Mrs. Browning's "Cry of the Children"?

" ' Our Father,' we say softly for a charm."

It is probable that Julian Serlcote had said *his* charm over that morning; that the words "Lead us not into temptation" had passed through his mind with more or less recognition of meaning in them. That he had paused at all to think over the temptation the day might hold for him is less probable; if he had he might have turned back even at the gate of that newly furnished villa in the Grove.

Yet there was nothing in it specially baleful. Mrs. Talbot was the widow of a London physician, and the daughter of a man well remembered in Lyme-St.-Mary's, an upright magistrate, a friend to the poor, and a neighborly man to his neighbors. Helena Talbot was not rich; nay, she confessed openly that she came back to "the home of her childhood" at least as much for the sake of economy as for the sake of sentiment. Yet she gave sentiment at least its weight, on this as on all other occasions.

Julian thought she looked younger than ever this afternoon, and handsomer, though he did not fail to perceive that much of this impression might be owing to her unapproachable knowledge of effect. She wore no cap, her glossy plentiful back hair, which curled naturally, was relieved by a background of palest pink damask curtain; the light that was in the room was subdued, etherealized with the subtlest skill; all was harmony, repose, point lace, old china, and graciousness.

Several of Julian's friends were already there when he went in; among them were the Miss Oakleys and their brother, and Dr. Sargent, all of whom greeted him with a warmth that he would have been very sorry to miss.

Mrs. Talbot was less fervid, but much more impressive. Julian was drawn in spite of himself to look closely again and again into those dark, meaningful eyes of hers. It was mere curiosity. What was it they expressed? He found himself wondering, guessing, longing to find out what message they were so softly and mysteriously delivering.

She had a strange power of attracting sympathy, though no one could say precisely why she needed any. She had friends, health, competence, and her "darling Lerna;" still, most people spoke of her as poor Mrs. Talbot.

Julian himself felt a certain something that was not pity, and yet had the dangerous force of it, something that seemed to awaken an altogether new emotion within him. Friendship, doubtless, it was, he said to himself, speaking in utter ignorance of the meaning of that sacred word, a "friend."

Even in this beginning of things he hardly approved of the fact that Mrs. Talbot had so many other friends, was so gracious and kind to all alike. Especially did he dislike her acceptance of Dr. Sargent's florid courtesies. The doctor was a widower, a short, stout, good-natured man, popular everywhere by sheer force of good-nature. He had little else to recommend him—until to-day Julian had not known how little, but he was now enabled to decide without much dissatisfaction that the doctor was deficient in that nameless virtue that people call tact. People had come who were very dubious about coming, and who were quite prepared to protest silently and politely against anything that should turn their dubiousness into regret. Each had his own line drawn, and the hardest and fastest lines were drawn by those who had had to leap the highest stone walls in order to be present.

Mrs. Talbot had quite perception enough to be aware of this element of watchful doubt, and was diplomatic enough to disarm it most sweetly. Perceiving that Dr. Sargent had drawn Julian, Mark Oakley, and some others into discussing the arrangements for a vol-

unteers' ball, and that the discussion was being listened to with silent but sufficiently evident disapprobation, she asked for a little music.

"Clarice dear," she said, turning to the younger Miss Oakley, with a certain gentle emphasis in her voice that made itself felt all through the room—"Clarice dear, *would* you be kind enough to sing us that touching little hymn, 'In sad misfortune's saddest hour'? I will play it for you on my new harmonium, which I have bought on purpose for Sunday use. And, Mr. Whitehouse, will you favor us by taking the tenor?"

She spoke in such plaintive, measured tones, and suppressed a sigh so touchingly as she finished speaking, that Mr. Whitehouse felt as if he would be glad to sing for her until he had no longer breath to sing. The whole order of things seemed changed as she swept with dignity across the room and laid her white hands softly upon the keys.

The music was not good. Clarice Oakley's voice was thin and uncertain; Edgar Whitehouse did not know his part. But no one seemed to mind; they were all listening to Mrs. Talbot, who was putting in a few contralto notes in tones that were almost startling in their impressiveness. Julian's susceptible emotions were raised to a new platform without his knowing it; it was almost as if he had never heard any one sing before. The time went on, and the music went on; some of the people went away, but it never occurred to Julian to do anything but wait until Mrs. Talbot should sing again.

He seemed to waken up from a kind of dream to find himself the only visitor remaining. Mrs. Talbot was talking to him, explaining her Sunday evening arrangements, in tones of greatest confidence. Lerna was sitting on a footstool staring at him with dreamy vacant eyes, caressing her mother's soft white hand. The sun was coming in at the west window more directly than it had done before.

"May I trouble you to draw the blind down, Mr. Serlcote?" Helena Talbot said, sighing again, and speaking beseechingly.

Julian complied with a sense of irritation at the smallness of the trouble, and looked about listlessly to see if there was nothing more to be done. Then he glanced at the clock and blushed slightly. Ought he not to go? He hesitated to sit down again, and Mrs. Talbot perceived his hesitation.

"You are not thinking of going!" she said, in a friendly way, "I was hoping you would stay to tea."

The invitation was not given too impressively: Julian had been wishing for it, but he was confused, strangely confused this afternoon. He uttered something that sounded like "thanks," but in a very undecided manner.

"Of course it will be very dull for you," she said. "We are not entertaining people. Lerna and I can sing for you a little, that is, if you care for singing."

"I care for singing more than for anything else in the world—that is, for your singing," he said, with an *abandon* that startled himself and made Mrs. Talbot smile in spite of the settled melancholy which forbade indiscriminate smiling.

"Ah," she replied, looking at him with more than ordinary sad-

ness in her beautiful eyes. "You should not say things like that to me now. My voice is gone; all is gone that made life worth living. What happiness remains to me in the future can only come to me through the happiness of my darling Lerna. If you like singing so much you shall hear her sing. To me it is like hearing the voice of my own youth again."

Julian looked down at the pretty childish stupid-looking girl with a look on his face almost as vacant as her own. Lerna was no more to him than any other pretty thing among Mrs. Talbot's surroundings. The idea of her singing reminded him of the doll that he had brought from Paris for his little sister Nelly, a doll that said "Mamma" in a most uncanny fashion.

Nevertheless he was constrained to admit that the girl had a voice—and a sweet, well-trained voice that blended with her mother's very effectively. It was not necessary, now that no narrow-minded person was present, to keep to that odious buzzing harmonium. Julian and Mrs. Talbot had a little laugh over the idea of one instrument being more sacred than another; then they laughed again over the people who were supposed to hold such ideas.

It was wonderful how well they agreed. Julian had never before met with any one who understood him so well, who presupposed his views so exactly, and who appraised his superiority with so much delicacy.

Was there not something complimentary in the mere choice of the music she played and sung? There was no need to keep to hymns and airs from oratorios now. French songs were sung that Julian understood and enjoyed, Italian duets that he did not understand but enjoyed still more, for Mrs. Talbot had to interpret them, and the interpretation required smiles and glances and other unconventional and fascinating modes of expression, some of which were very intoxicating to a man so young, so impressionable, so utterly light-headed and light-hearted as Julian Serclote was.

Very young he was and very happy that evening, with a new and transcendent happiness that he never tried to define.

His emotion was too much of the nature of delirium for him to have any dread of consequences. He thought of Agnes somewhat uneasily as he walked home, but Agnes had gone to bed; indeed, the whole family had gone save Martin.

Julian would not have been sorry if Martin had been in bed also. What right had a stupid boy like that to give himself airs about nothing? Julian liked Martin, and altogether approved of Martin's liking for him; but he did not like to have his pleasant, open advances met with silence and sullenness because he had chosen to make a quiet visit on a Sunday evening.

Agnes was far wiser, and she was a dear good girl after all, Julian said to himself, after receiving her smiling, tender greeting next morning. There was no rebuke there, tacit or other. Her face was cloudless, her eyes clear and calm. She had spoken of her trouble to Him who alone knew of it as she knew; and with Him she had left it for weal or further woe.

CHAPTER V.

MUCH OF MADNESS AND MORE OF SIN.

For only then, when memory
Is hushed, am I at rest.

WORDSWORTH.

It was not possible in a gossipy little town like Lyme-St-Mary's that the ways and doings of a young man so popular as Julian Serlcote should escape observation. Hitherto the observation had always been sympathetic and admiring. Even the one or two far-sighted people who shook their heads over certain things had not been heard to advance much in the way of uncharitable comment.

Matters were changing a little now; his friends found themselves called upon to defend him and make excuses for him more frequently than they liked to own. Even Edgar Whitehouse, who could put up with a certain amount of disapproval on his own account, was sorry to feel the creeping depreciation of Julian Serlcote, sorry to know that the change was in no way groundless.

He tried a feeble remonstrance once. It was pitiful work for him, but let him have due credit for attempting it.

Quite late one autumn evening Julian and he had met accidentally at the top of the Corn Market. Whitehouse was going for a solitary stroll on the Elmthorpe Road; he had stopped for a moment to light a cigar when he saw a figure coming slowly down the steps of the Westminster Hotel just opposite.

"Is that you, Serlcote?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Yes," said Julian. "Where are you going, old fellow?"

"Home with you."

"No, you're not. I'm not going home. Can't stand the paternal back-parlor to-night."

"What has happened?"

"Nothing—nothing unusual. I wish something would happen."

Edgar Whitehouse hesitated, then said with an effort,

"Well, you will not have to wish long, I should say, if you go on as you have been doing lately."

Julian raised his head quickly, laughing a scornful laugh.

"That comes well from you," he said, ironically. "What's that about the 'first stone'?"

"Don't quote Scripture to-night," Whitehouse said, rather gravely; "and if you won't go home, come for a turn with me."

Julian complied readily; any chance was better now than that of having to face his father or Agnes alone.

They walked on for a while in silence, or silence only broken by Julian trying to hum the first few bars of a French air which he had been listening to with rapture during the early part of the evening. The mere remembrance of it seemed to excite him, to make his own thought intolerable.

"Why can't you say something, Whitehouse?" he began, with an impatience quite new to him. "If you're in a preaching mood,

preach; but I'd rather you didn't. It would be no use. I'm going down the broad road, and all the preaching in the world won't stop me."

Whitehouse put his arm within Julian's, a movement of affection that he could have shown to no other human being in the world.

"Don't talk like that," he said. "I'm supposed to be pretty hardened for my years, but there *are* things that *I* can't stand."

"And there are things that *I* can't stand," replied Julian; "things that I shall go mad with trying to stand."

"What sort of things?"

"Don't ask me; don't try to get to know the worst of me. I'm a scoundrel and a dastard; be content with knowing that."

"I should like something more definite," returned Whitehouse, coolly. "I'm a lawyer, remember."

"Yes, I know you are, and acquainted with villainy of all kinds. You'll be acquainted with mine some day. You will remember me as a man who robbed his own father, and broke the heart of the woman who was to have been his wife."

Edgar Whitehouse made no comment for a minute or two. He perceived that Julian was excited, and that therefore his strong language might be to a certain extent figurative.

"I don't think your cousin looked particularly broken-hearted when I saw her yesterday," he said, after a time.

"No," replied Julian, "she's not one 'to wear her heart on her sleeve;' besides, it hasn't come to that yet."

"Then why should it come to that?"

"That is a question you can answer for yourself as well as I can answer it for you, perhaps better," Julian replied, with a new vehemence of tone and manner. "Don't pretend that you can't see what's going on. It is said that on-lookers see most of the game. I should say it's true in this case. I see nothing myself. I am blinded and bewildered."

"And infatuated," added Whitehouse, with a professional clinch.

"Anything you choose," said Julian. "Words will alter nothing."

"Probably not; still there are certain things that would be better altered. Let me give you one piece of information that may be of use to you. I am sorry to drag Mrs. Talbot's name into the discussion, but let me assure you that she has not the slightest intention of bestowing her fair hand on you."

"Nor have I ever had the slightest hope that she would do so."

"Then why in the name of all that is sane are you acting so madly?"

"Because I am mad."

"I believe you are; or at any rate madder than I thought you."

There was another pause; utter recklessness is a difficult thing to deal with.

"You said a while ago," Whitehouse began again, "that you were going down the broad road. I see no reason to doubt your word. You also said that nothing would stop you. A question arises out of that. Have you the smallest wish to be stopped?"

It was Julian's first impulse to say, "I don't know that I have,"

but the words did not pass his lips. He remained silent for a while; then he said, sadly, "I'm afraid it's too late."

"That depends upon yourself altogether. It *is* too late if you're beyond making an effort."

"Effort! What effort can I make? I can't turn round upon myself in the cool way you could do and call myself an idiot, and have done with it. No, let things turn as they will now, there's nothing for me but misery."

"Again, I say that that depends upon yourself," said Whitehouse, still speaking calmly, but with more earnestness and emphasis than before. He was much older than Julian; he knew that he had influence over him; sadder, he knew that his influence had not always been exercised for good. He had been touched with remorse before, but not to the extent of endeavoring to make reparation.

"There is only one chance for you," he went on, gravely. "Leave the place for a while; that will change the current of things as nothing else can do. If you remain here and go on as you have been doing, I think you are quite right—there *is* nothing but misery for you."

"But how can I go?" said Julian, with a certain amount of contemptuous surprise that his clever friend should offer such impracticable counsel. "What excuse could I make to my father for wishing to go away again?"

"My advice would be this: make no excuse at all; tell him the whole truth. He might be startled, he might be angry, but he would respect your motive, and he would appreciate your straightforwardness. Take my advice, Julian."

There was another pause, a crisis wherein a heart strong for the right would have leaped at once to a right decision. Julian Serlcote hesitated, then said, slowly and sadly:

"It can't be done."

"Why not?"

There was no reply. To have replied truthfully would have involved further confession—confession of debts, and of things done to cover debts, that Julian knew his father would neither forget nor forgive readily. His absence would bring about disclosures that he dared not even think of.

"You are not thinking of the volunteers' ball?" Whitehouse asked, presently.

"Well, I shouldn't like to be away," replied Julian, not sorry to have a straw to catch at in his extremity. "Besides, the affair is fixed for the 25th of next month. I couldn't go before that time."

"I think you could," said Whitehouse, knowing that the ball would be a test in more ways than one. "I think you could if you tried. It seems to me that your only safety lies in acting *at once*. If I were in your place, and had a father like yours, I should go home now—to-night—and tell him whatever it was necessary to tell."

Julian was touched—almost was he persuaded, but not quite. Whitehouse never knew how nearly successful he had been. It seemed to him that Julian was more dogged, more irritatingly pertinacious, than he had ever known him. For a moment he half repented of the effort he had made. In the days that came after, he

repented bitterly that his effort had not been made with tenfold determination.

CHAPTER VI.

AH ME, THE SORROW DEEPENS DOWN.

Woman, one weak, as you say,
And loving of all things to be passive,
Passive, patient, receptive, yea,
Even of wrong and misdoing.

ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH.

It was fortunate—or unfortunate—for Julian that just at this juncture none of his family seemed to have leisure to be very anxious about him. Elizabeth was ill, suffering from a dangerous illness, and everybody's thought was about her.

This commonplace elder sister was strangely missed from the household. She was not clever, no one could remember ever having even smiled or sighed over anything Elizabeth had said; but she was much given to smiling herself; it was an easy substitute for speech, a thing by no means easy. Perhaps it was this genial, honest smile of hers that was so much wanted now that it was missing, and it may be that other little-prized things were also discovered to be of value; household order and punctuality and a pair of capable womanly hands, ready in womanly fashion to do whatever might be found to do with all their might. Mrs. Serlcote was nervous and tearful and fussily helpless; the children were awed into sad, silent idleness. Agnes' whole time was spent in Elizabeth's room.

Poor old Joshua Serlcote seemed to be never weary of wandering up and down between that room and the shop. He used to stop at the foot of the stairs, take off his boots there, and then go up quietly, grimly, with head erect and lips compressed, the tenderness in him nowise visible save in the act he did. Agnes used to listen for his gentle tap at the door. She liked his coming. Sometimes when Elizabeth was asleep he would stay a little and sit and talk by the fire in soft whispers. Agnes did not know it, he hardly knew it himself, but there was no one else in the house to whom he talked so much or with so little reserve.

When he had first talked to her of Julian, the old man had betrayed with touching simplicity the pride and delight he had in his son. No detail seemed to have been too minute for his notice. "I never saw the gentleman who could hand a tea-cup with more grace than that which is natural to my boy," he said one day. Agnes could not help smiling, but she was much impressed. It seemed strange that the stiff, prim, ungraceful old man should have an eye so keen for gracefulness. She never forgot that, nor some other things that slipped quietly and sadly out of sight.

Then came a time wherein his talk about Julian insensibly took an apologetic tone. Whatever the son did the father seemed anxious to set in the fairest light possible. He never lost an opportunity of doing this. It comforted him, helped him to believe his own word. No one knew how pathetically he had determined to believe it.

Now, however, rumor had reached his ear, the pain had gone deeper into his heart because of it, and the old man had for some time past fallen into silence concerning his eldest son.

Agnes had not seen Julian for over a week. He was seldomer than ever to be seen in the house or the shop, or in any place where he might reasonably have been looked for, and there was a kind of impassiveness about him that precluded much questioning. Even his father felt it, hesitated, and suppressed inquiries that would have been better made. It was known that the volunteer ball was impending, that Julian believed himself under the necessity of superintending the preparations in person; in fact, he made quite a hardship of it. The Town Hall had to be decorated, the feminine taste of the neighborhood—or rather such of it as was available—had to be pressed into the service, and it was well known that there was no other person belonging to the corps so thoroughly fitted for duties of this kind as Julian Serlcote.

His satisfaction with this state of things was genuine, so far as it went, but it did not go nearly so far with him now as it would have done a year ago. That fair youthful face of his was already beginning to speak of a life not fair in any way. He complained of weariness, and it was not difficult to believe him; belief was more difficult when he strove after that easy disengaged tone and manner that had been one of his most winning fascinations.

He disappeared very early on the day before the ball. His father had meant to urge a single word of remonstrance, perhaps to add one of warning also. Poor old man! he had thought over it much, nay, he had even uttered a prayer over it, that it might prevail a little, that he might speak without anger, without hardness. But no chance was given him of speaking at all. Julian did not return until the evening, just in time to dress; he had not a minute for anything else.

He looked unusually well, and he knew it. He was excited already, and his excitement lent a glow of color to his face, a deeper luster to his eyes. He had taken extra pains, too, with his beautiful yellow hair, brushing it into the soft waves and curls that he knew Agnes so much liked to see. His first thought of vanity turned to her. Should he go gently to his sister's room for a second or so? He stood hesitating at the top of the long passage, strongly inclined to venture down. He might have gone, and it might have been well for him; but just at that moment the band struck up a stirring strain in the Corn Market; it was quite time he was at his post.

Think of it then, more than a week since Agnes had had any sight of him! Had the separation been the ordinary one of miles, Agnes Dyne was a woman to have borne it with at least ordinary resignation. Her love was not of the restless, doubting, passionate kind that is for some people the only form of love. She was true and faithful herself, and had looked for nothing but truth and faithfulness in return.

Julian had quite insight enough to know something of the workings of a nature so different from his own. He did not think that because Agnes was quiet and natural and undemonstrative in her loving, as she was in all other things, that therefore her love was a thing of no depth or intensity. There had been times when he

would have been glad to think so, when his knowledge of her strong deep-rooted affection had been little more than a burden to him; but these times were transient and surprising to himself in sane moments.

These saner moments of his were few and far between now. Life was putting on for him the aspect of a dark and wide confusion. He drifted with this current and with that, finding no anchorage, seeking none.

The ancients had a belief that temporary bewilderments of this kind might be Heaven-sent. It was an easy, if not a satisfactory, way of accounting for things not satisfactory in themselves. Does any remnant of this notion linger, facilitating self-forgiveness, weakening resolution, making repentance itself a thing to be repented of?

Agnes Dyne sat altogether silent, altogether stirless, while Julian was leaving his room, coming down the three steps at the door of it, standing hesitant on the landing. She understood it all, knew how he would look, the pardonable touch of vanity that would be in him, the desire to have that vanity gratified. Her heart seemed to stand still too, until the band struck up and Julian hurried away; then it beat somewhat wildly until it flagged to the dull sickening sound of the door closing after him.

She wished she had gone out to him as he stood there. Why had she not? Was she resenting his absences, his neglects, his coldnesses? If so, then she was acting foolishly, as she knew. Resentment, betray itself how it will, never yet wrought any touch of acceptable sorrow in man or in woman; never yet infused life into a languid love, or helped for a moment to revive a dead or dying one.

But Agnes could feel little self-distress here. She knew sadly that she had obeyed stronger and truer instincts. If she had loved him less she might have been less diffident in her love.

Sitting silently in that prosaic room of Elizabeth's, with the heavy sound of the closing door lingering on her ear, with heavier things lying on her heart, she was more conscious of sorrow than she had ever been before. She was more conscious of sorrow, more conscious also of the love that made her sorrow.

In almost all true affections there are hours wherein the strength, the reality, of the feeling seems to dawn anew with sudden power. Life is lit up with a new light, hidden things are made visible. hidden or unrecognized pains and troubles as well as unrecognized joys.

This was such a moment of reawakening for Agnes. Love slighted, wounded, stung into passionate longing, surpasses in strength love satisfied or hopeful as far as the storm-troubled sea surpasses the sleeping lake.

No such hour of wild unrest had ever been hers hitherto; her emotion was stronger than herself, and therefore not to be understood of her, nor altogether controlled.

Hers was not a tearful nature, and it seemed to be no time for weeping over any sorrow of her own while watching by the sick-bed of another; yet a very tempest of tears shook her as she sat there, tears not to be forgotten so long as anything should be remembered. Elizabeth was sleeping quietly; Agnes crept away to the other end

of the room. All the others had gone to bed save Joshua Serlcote, who sat alone in the parlor below.

Poor old man, he too had been intending to go for some time; he hardly knew why he did not go. He was weary, more with an ill-concealed anxiety than with any labor that he had done. His sole consolation, the long clay pipe, was less consolatory than usual. The fire, let him attend to it how he would, refused to be a cheerful fire at that hour of the night; fresh coal seemed to burn to dead white ashes as if by alchemy.

Once he thought of stealing up to his daughter's room, but now that she was out of danger, perhaps Agnes would be sleeping. He wished that he too could sleep and forget the trouble that he could neither look at bravely nor put away from him.

The hours crept on very slowly; midnight, two o'clock, three, four. One more pipe and then he would go to bed, certainly he would go after one more. This he said to himself a dozen times. But as it was getting so late it might as well be a little later. Half an hour could not matter now; if only the fire would burn, if the room were not so chilly, he should not mind in the least.

He was too much wearied for any impatience, for anything but quietly sitting there, not knowing why he sat.

As the morning went on once or twice sounds from the street reached him, rousing him to slight touches of resentment, stirring that other watcher in the room above to new fears and sadness not at all slight.

All through the night they had heard the Town Hall clock booming out slowly and solemnly through the darkness, speaking of quite other things than the revel going on below.

No tinkling cemetery bell was ever half so impressive as that ancient clock of Lyme-St.-Mary's striking in the night. If ever you had listened to its tone while watching or suffering, you never heard it again without hearing the echo of those hours wherein you listened so sadly.

It was a long time after five o'clock had struck when sounds of uncertain feet and much-raised voices were heard coming down the passage that led to the side door of Joshua Serlcote's house. The old man listened nervously, irritably; then a long loud knock awoke in him a feeling that was half anger, half fear.

There was no light when he opened the door, but just then Agnes came tremblingly to the top of the stairs with a lamp in her hand.

"Remain where you are," her uncle said, in a hard, grating tone. Then he turned angrily to the noisy group outside; he could not distinguish any face. A voice out of the darkness said, amiably,

"Brought your son home, sir."

"He ain't well," said another voice, equally pleasant in tone.

"Been dancin' too much," added an explanatory person in the background.

"All along o' that ere young lady wi' yellow hair and blue-an'-silver gownd," apologized a fourth.

"Silence, every one of you!" cried Joshua Serlcote. I use the word "cried" considerably, for his tone was one of such extreme pain that no other word would do so well.

"Silence!—Julian, are you there? Dismiss your *friends*, sir."

Imagine it—that gray-haired, irreproachable old man watching by the sofa in the narrow, chilly back-parlor for another hour or more, watching in the strictest silence.

Then he bestirred himself. The man who had sat there all night, with no creature comfort save his clay pipe, betook himself to the making of strong tea for the bright-haired Absalom who had bowed his spirit to the very dust; and his Absalom took it, but not with the grace with which he had been wont to handle a tea-cup.

This was no time for words. Julian watched his father's tremulous, awkward movements, saw his gray, worn face, that seemed to have grown gray since yesterday, and, seeing, he was touched to things he dared not utter.

They sat there till the wondering Sarah broke in upon them with brush and duster, then the father and son went upstairs together, the son to sleep heavily till the middle of the day, the father to find sleep not possible, nor rest of any kind for mind or body.

There was one other sleepless head, wearied with listening, thinking, sorrowing, praying; nay, there were two who had not slept much—Martin, in his attic room overhead; Agnes, in the room down the long passage.

Since Julian's return her sorrow had been even more bewildering than before, more mixed with pity and perplexing doubt and yearning forgiveness. She had acknowledged to herself that his character was one that it was very difficult for her to understand, but she understood something of his capacity for suffering from remorse. There had been times when she—not knowing his error—had fancied his contrition exaggerated; and, remembering these times, she grieved sadly for the grief that she knew must be his to-day.

She was not wrong in fearing that that would be a dark day for Julian. It was darker than she knew.

The night that had passed was a kind of crisis in his downward progress—one of those turning-points that affect a man's position and color the character he bears with tints more indelible than he may be aware of at the time.

Julian was not fully aware of the causes he had for sorrow, but he had no wish to know more than he knew already. He dared not look back, still less dared he look forward.

The November afternoon was passing on when he came down from his room. A gray gloom hung over the town; the house was still and silent. There was no one in the sitting-room save his mother, who was knitting socks for him, wishing mildly that he would not vex his father so much, nor run such dreadful risks from exposure to night air. At the same time she had a private opinion that her husband was apt to vex himself needlessly where Julian was concerned. Once during the forenoon she had ventured upon a remonstrance.

"You shouldn't expect too much, Joshua," she said, in tones that were weakly acidulous. "Young people will be young people, remember."

Finding that this original proposition was received in silence, Mrs. Serlcote yielded to a certain sub-indignant feeling, only to be expressed by the faster clicking of her knitting-needles. It was a relief to her when Julian came down, looking chill and pale, and

much in need of the appetizing little repast which she had duly prepared. He was in a mood to be grateful for sympathy of this practical nature—very quietly and silently grateful.

He did not remain there long; tea-time was drawing near, and he had no wish to face either his father or Martin so long as he could avoid doing so.

It was nearly dark now. He went up to the drawing-room and lit the gas, not perceiving a tall, slight figure standing between the curtains of the further window. He was a little startled when a troubled wistful voice said, "Julian!"

It thrilled through him as a cry of pain might have done. He was quickly by Agnes' side, holding her hand caressingly, speaking in soothing tones.

"What is it?"—he asked—"what is the matter? Are you ill?" Then he said, tremulously, "Is it because of me? You are not grieving for me? Don't do that, I am not worth it. You must try to forget me; I think I shall have to go away soon. I don't know what will happen to me, but I should like to know that you are not caring, Agnes; you must try not to care—not to suffer. At the best I was never worthy of you."

Again tears were dropping slowly on Agnes' face; sad, bitter tears, not to be dried by being told not to care.

"Do you think one can only love people who are worthy of being loved?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, absently. He was thinking of other things—thinking thoughts that took the strength from him even as he stood. He sat down, or rather sunk down, despondently.

"Don't talk to me, Agnes," he said; "at any rate don't talk in that way. You would not if you knew all; instead of loving you would despise me."

"Do you think so?" she asked, speaking through her tears, laying her hand softly on his. "Do you think I could ever hate what I have longed for during the last eight days with an intensity that has been almost sin. Julian, I don't think you quite know what my love is."

She spoke so simply, so truly, and out of such a depth of trouble, that he, in that sadder trouble of his, could find no reply.

"If you were grieving," she went on, "sorry for the things you say I don't know about, why not put them away from you at once and forever? Is it not possible—

"To be as if you had not been till now,
And now were—simply what you choose to be?"

Julian looked for a moment as if he were half bewildered by the idea. A change passed over his face; he seemed to awaken more completely to consciousness of his sorrow and his sin.

"If it were possible," he said, "I would strain every power that is in me to do it."

"Can you not tell me why you think it impossible?"

"No. If I could tell you—or, rather, if I could tell my father—the worst would be over, but I can't do that. He has trusted me so that I think I could face death sooner than face him with the confession that I had betrayed his trust."

This was worse than Agnes had feared. She only half understood, but she shrunk tremblingly from trying to understand.

"Is your father so hard?" she said, gently. "Can you not see for yourself how he loves you? and is it not the grand use and beauty of having some one to love you that you may have some one to bear with you?"

There was a slight pause; Julian spoke again.

"He has borne much, but there are things that he would never bear. I know him better than you can know him, Agnes; and I know myself, or rather the position I am in. Don't make another effort to save me. Forget me, and help my father to forget me. Remind him that he has other sons who may be more to him than I have been."

"I should be saying what I did not believe. Oh, Julian, think of the Shepherd's joy over the one sheep that had strayed; the ninety-and nine that had never wandered were as nothing to Him in comparison. Your father is troubled now—so much troubled with doubts and fears and anxieties, that if you were to go to him confidently and tell him the worst, I feel certain he would be so much relieved as to be ready both to forgive and to forget."

Again for a few silent moments Julian Serlcote halted between two opinions. To get rid of that perilous load of secret sin before it brought him to an open shame seemed far too fair a possibility to be realized. Yet the prospect made his breathing quicker, his pulse irregular. There was no power in him to think clearly and steadily, much less to resolve with any degree of firmness. He was tied and bound with the chain of his past sins, even more completely than he knew.

"I—I will think of it," he said, falteringly. "I know it is my only chance."

He had risen now as if to go. As he turned, Agnes spoke again beseechingly, fervidly:

"Don't rest content with the thinking of it, Julian," she begged "at least pray over it. Remember this:

"There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given."

Then he went out with these words ringing in his ears. They had no power to soothe him. He felt more unhinged than before, more desperately in need of some nepenthe that should lull his soul into that death-like sleep which was the only peace now possible to him.

Martin was standing outside in the dimly-lighted Corn Market, watching and whistling, with his hands in his pockets. It was a fine evening, cold, but clear and starlight.

"Come for a walk, Julian?" he said, in that pleasant, winning voice of his.

But Julian was in no mood for walking.

"Can't this evening," he said; "I am going up to the Westminster."

Martin wondered at him sadly. Was Julian bent on finding to

the uttermost how true it is that some men can only become pure from their errors by suffering for them.

CHAPTER VII.

MARTIN DOES EVIL THAT GOOD MAY COME.

A nature quiveringly poised
In reach of storms, whose qualities may turn
To murdered virtues that still walk as ghosts
Within the shuddering soul and shriek remorse.

The Spanish Gypsy.

THOSE people spoke altogether unfairly—one may say ignorantly—who attributed Julian Serlcote's deterioration solely to the influence of Mrs. Talbot. She had—perhaps not altogether unconsciously—thrown over him a certain spell of infatuation, which had blinded him, intoxicated him, confused his way altogether. She had drawn him from his home, sympathized with his errors and his weaknesses, but she had not been the cause of these errors. The lines upon which his life had been laid down before Mrs. Talbot's arrival were sufficiently determinative.

He had never really swerved from them. He was proceeding steadily—or unsteadily—toward that dark vanishing-point where the said lines converged. People had ceased to whisper; they spoke openly and unhesitatingly. That prestige which he had so appreciated himself, and which his father had so valued for him, was fast departing, and its departure was felt both painfully and distinctly.

Change was visible even in his appearance. There were times when there was an expression on his face that was almost one of degradation. His temper, too, was becoming uncertain. The children were not now always glad when Julian came in. His manner, that had been so kindly and pleasant, was often sullen or peevish. The poor little things learned to watch and wait; to withhold any tendency to too sudden joy if on any occasion Julian seemed to be himself again.

But Julian's happiest, or rather his least miserable, hours were spent at Mrs. Talbot's. It would be difficult to define the exact nature of the feelings he had toward her, or to describe the evil case into which his love for Agnes Dyne had fallen. He was bewildered himself, and doubtful. That he still had love for Agnes he knew certainly—nay, he even came so near the truth as to perceive that it was the reality of his love for her, his appreciation of her goodness and purity, that many a time kept him from her presence, that oftener still made him seem stiff, and cold, and unconfiding, while she was spending her best and tenderest self in efforts to draw him from the wilderness wherein he wandered. His conscience disturbed him, but less and less distressingly as the days went on. He had refused to listen too often and too persistently for this still small voice to have much power over him now.

Still, it had power enough to make him glad of anything that should conduce to even partial oblivion.

It was more than merely pleasant to him to be soothed by the languors and sentimentalities of Mrs. Talbot's emotional music to

forget his sorrows, his sins, and their probable consequences, in listening to her low and unconsciously artificial tones—tones that, notwithstanding their unreality, were listened to everywhere with deference and attention. She was never at a loss for topics of conversation. Art, science, literature, music, politics, or cheap theology—nothing came amiss. Her silvery-sounding platitudes were always ready, always selected with wonderful tact to suit the society in which she happened to find herself. High Church, Low Church, or no church at all, it did not matter to Mrs. Talbot. People invariably left her presence more satisfied with their own views than before, and more than ever convinced that she was the one understanding woman they had ever met.

Of course she knew, as everybody else in that little world of Lyme-St.-Mary's knew, that Julian Serlcote was just now "promising badly;" that was the euphuism they used. Yet it did not alter Mrs. Talbot's manner to him in the least. Why should it? She was a woman who knew something of the ways of a wider world than that, and was proud of her knowledge. Even when a kindly but narrow-minded friend warned her that her name was being coupled with young Serlcote's more freely and frequently than was expedient, she only smiled, but her smile was very pitying, very superior. She did not say much, but in the few words she used she managed to imply a great deal more.

That was her way, and a clever way it was. She could, by sympathizing with people, open their eyes to grievances that affected themselves, but which they had hitherto lacked either sense or sensitiveness to perceive. Julian had never really felt how narrow his home was, how uncongenial his surroundings, how impossible the slow, monotonous life that he was expected to live, until Mrs. Talbot's compassion awoke him to fuller consciousness. There had been times when by the gentlest and vaguest suggestions in the world she had caused him to look with very doubtful satisfaction upon his engagement. Her influence in this and in other things might only be temporary, but it was not the less a weight in the balance.

Julian was to be found at her house well-nigh every evening now. Sometimes other friends were there; at other times, to Julian's greater contentment, no one was present save Lerna.

It was not that Mrs. Talbot and he had anything special to say to each other, but that the things that were not special could be talked of with less restraint. If he were in a despondent mood Mrs. Talbot was more at liberty to devote herself to the task of cheering him; if he were musically inclined she could play the music she knew would please him best. By degrees he came to feel a silent resentment if any other friend of hers dropped in unexpectedly, more especially if that other friend was Dr. Sargent.

One evening—it was again close to Christmas-time—Julian had left her house much earlier than usual and in no very pleasant mood. He had gone there tortured with remorse, with dread of impending discovery, haunted by the silently reproachful faces he had left in the Corn Market, wearied of life and of everything that life seemed to offer him, and feeling that even in that rose-pink drawing-room, with its gilding, its sympathetic sentiment, its cush-

ions, and its consolations, there would be no peace for him that night.

But the room and its occupant had wrought their old charm. There was no reproach for him there, silent or other; no one to irritate him by urging him to effort that was distasteful, to acts that were impossible. Mrs. Talbot's gracious smile, her soothing music, her quiet, tranquil ways, had never been more grateful to him.

But he had hardly begun to give himself up to the restful feeling that was stealing upon him when Dr. Sargent announced himself, walking in, greeting Mrs. Talbot and Lerna, seating himself, with an air of familiarity that was most disturbing. Mrs. Talbot seemed disturbed too, even slightly tremulous, and Lerna smiled and blushed in quite a mystifying manner. The doctor himself appeared to be in an unusually comfortable mood, and more disposed to patronize Julian than he had been for some time.

Julian could not bear it long; he grew feverish and irritable, and rose to go suddenly. Dr. Sargent smiled in a very vexatious way, and Mrs. Talbot did not mend matters by seeming somewhat colder than usual. She gave him her hand very graciously, but her tones were distinctively polite as she said, "Good-evening, Mr. Serlcote. I hope we shall see you again some time this week."

Julian looked up with undisguised astonishment. He had for so long come and gone just as it suited him, that he could not remember the time when he had had any invitation. Was this meant to put things on a new footing?—and why?

He was leaving the room, when Mrs. Talbot spoke again, less frigidly than before.

"By the way, is not Miss Dyne's year of mourning over now?" she asked.

"Yes," said Julian, blushing hotly, and feeling the doctor's smile lie like a ray from a burning-glass.

"Then do bring her with you. Tell her not to wait to be formally invited, but to come up in a friendly way. — Shall I fix an evening? Shall I say next Tuesday, and I will have one or two other friends to meet you?"

"Thanks, thanks!" said Julian, much excited, and hurrying away even as he spoke; and it may be noted as curious enough that in the midst of the wild tumult of feeling that possessed him his first distinct idea was one of indignation on Agnes' account. The mere mention of her name by Mrs. Talbot in the presence of Dr. Sargent had, for various not very patent reasons, jarred upon him, Mrs. Talbot had so seldom spoken of Agnes, and had even contrived to make him feel as if there were some latent delicacy in refraining from speaking of her. And as to waiting a whole year because of her mourning before inviting her to spend a quiet evening, there was absurdity on the face of it!

Still, unreasonably enough, Julian's resentment glanced aside from Mrs. Talbot. He could not blame her. It was easy to blame himself, easier still to blame Dr. Sargent. The more he thought the more confused and vehement his thought became.

His sense of disapprobation was keen, but in what was he disappointed? Had he missed an evening's entertainment or a life's purpose?

He did not know himself. He went striding along the dark road, through mud and sleet and piercing wind. He could see nothing, hear nothing, hardly even hear his own footsteps. Other footsteps were approaching. The two black figures had nearly walked each other down, when both uttered a warning exclamation. Then Julian demanded, sternly:

"What are you about here, Martin? Acting as a spy, I suppose?"

"I was intending to wait until I met with you," said Martin, with some determination.

"Exactly! And now that you have met me?"

"I want to speak to you."

"Well, speak out! I'm not exactly in a listening mood; but say what you've got to say."

"I can't say what I've got to say here," replied Martin, striving with the utmost effort to keep command of his words and tones. "If you will come home with me, and go up to my room or yours, we can talk things over quietly."

"A pretty programme!" sneered Julian. "Come along to the Westminster, if you are bent on making yourself disagreeable."

Martin offered no objection. The two men went silently along the road and into the town. The wet streets were cheerless in the dim lamplight. Julian shivered and looked pale as he went up the steps of the hotel. Perhaps he was in need of that steaming glass for which he called so eagerly and appeared to enjoy so thoroughly. Martin waited in unretreshed patience.

"Now, then, old wet blanket, let's have this doleful story," said Julian, in more amiable tones.

"It won't take long in the telling," said Martin, fixing his sad blue-gray eyes steadfastly on his cousin. "Grant & Greenlow have written to demand payment of that account of theirs."

Julian's paleness became paler, and his lips turned to an ashen gray. He did not speak. Martin had half expected an oath, a rare thing from Julian; but this was a rare occasion. There are, however, circumstances under which the strongest language is weaker than silence.

When Julian did speak it was to ask a question, but his tone was that of one who affirms.

"I suppose my father has got the letter?" he said.

Martin's guilt had now to come to light. He blushed hotly and quickly as a girl blushes.

"No," he said, speaking rapidly and with evident shame and distress. "No, I have it with me. I have intercepted it and opened it. Of course I knew what it was. I have expected it for weeks. It only came to-night. I could not rest until I had seen you."

Julian mused a while; leaning his head on his hand, staring into the fire.

"It's all very good, my dear fellow," he said, presently; "but it's only a respite. They'll write again and speedily, if this letter is not attended to."

"And you can't attend to it?"

"Why ask the question? I can write, asking for time; I can do nothing more, as you know. I have not had a shilling these two months but what I've got from my mother."

There was another silence, which was broken by Martin.

"Is it any use my entreating you again to tell your father?" he asked.

"Not the slightest. I will face any other course than that."

"What other course is open to you?"

"There are two others, and only two, committing suicide and absconding. I shall try the latter to begin with."

Was he mad, altogether mad? Martin wondered. Sitting there, possessed of youth, of a constitution naturally good, of a certain amount of a certain kind of talent; the son of a father who secretly worshiped him, who openly and patiently bore with him; the betrothed husband of the one good and beautiful and lovable woman that Martin had ever seen, and yet giving himself up to despair and ruin, without hope and without effort. The sight was as incomprehensible as it was distressing.

"Julian," he said, presently, "to talk in this wild way is foolish enough, as you know; to act with any such wildness would be worse than foolish. This is a bad business, and, to speak plainly, I fear you know of others as bad. But I feel convinced yet that we might make matters all straight again in a couple of years, that is, if you will set your shoulder to the wheel at once. You have a good allowance; and my uncle told me that he should make at least half of the business over to you when you married; in fact, I believe he is only waiting for you to settle down to make the offer. As for present difficulties or anything that may turn up unexpectedly, well, you know, I don't mind a little unpleasantness on my own account. I can take a fair amount of blame any day. Let me manage that. And as to this affair of Grant & Greenlow's I have sixty pounds in Forrest's bank—that's about half. Send it up tomorrow, and ask for time for the remainder. We must manage it between us, somehow."

How easy it all seemed to Martin! Julian thought, rather bitterly. How impossible it was to himself! He sat there leaning over the table with his face buried in his hands, his whole attitude expressive of the misery and dejection that possessed him.

"It's no use, Martin," he said, sadly, after a time. "I shall not take one penny of your money, and you shall not take one iota of my blame. But don't think me ungrateful, don't think that I can't see all that your offer means."

"I shall certainly think that you don't see what I mean if you refuse."

"Refuse I do, and shall! I'm low, but not so low as that!"

"Then you will have to go lower."

"Doubtless; but I shall go alone."

"That you can't do. Julian, listen; I'll tell you another piece of truth that I never intended to breathe. I'm making these offers as much for *her* sake as for yours. If I could save her from the pain that she will suffer—that she is suffering—through you, I would willingly give all I have to give."

Julian looked up, and a tinge of color came to his face.

"Don't misunderstand me," Martin went on, tremulously; "I should as soon dream of falling in love with one of the royal prin-

cesses, but I might even dream of averting trouble from one of these if I had the chance."

In the midst of his distress Julian could hardly help smiling at the thought of Martin as a rival—plain-looking, sallow, awkward Martin Brooke!

There is no need to remain in that small private room at the Westminster any longer; no need to listen to any more of Martin's unsuccessful pleading, or of Julian's determined resistance. If Martin had known all, he might have given in sooner, but it seemed to him that Julian was shutting out hope willfully and blindly.

What could be done? Martin wondered as he went home alone, reluctantly leaving Julian behind him. Nothing had been settled or decided. That letter of Grant & Greenlow's was still in Martin's pocket, weighing heavily there—and other things were weighing more heavily yet in his heart. It had been once on his lips to ask Julian straight out what truth there was in the rumor that connected Mrs. Talbot's name with his so openly—this not so much for his own satisfaction as for Joshua Serlcote's, who was, as he knew, fretting not a little in secret over the hints that he had had concerning Julian's infatuation. Martin himself had for some time found it very difficult to give any credence to these reports, but latterly he had been obliged to confess that Julian was lending color to them. Doubtless it was done more in idleness and thoughtlessness than of set purpose; but Martin wished now that he had made some allusion to the matter; he might at least have offered a warning.

A very few days later the inhabitants of Lyme-St.-Mary's, in their surprise and sorrow, were casting blame about everywhere except on Julian Serlcote himself. He was so young, and had been so bright and pleasant and generous; it was his very virtues that led him on into vice. Why had no one taken him in hand—tried to arrest him? If not by persuasion, then by sheer force? Those who knew least about him felt this conviction strongest—that he might have been saved if any human being had strongly willed to save him.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOO LATE.

Man should do nothing that he should repent;
But if he have, and say that he is sorry,
It is a worse fault, if he be not truly.

BEAUMONT *and* FLETCHER.

THAT was a livelier Christmas-eve than usual. The Serlcotes had always kept up a few traditional customs—such as the eating of mince-pies, the burning of a Yule-log, and the ceremonious cutting of the big plum-cake, but these observances had generally been conducted after a very dry and lifeless fashion. Things were a little changed this year. There was to be a children's party on the day after Christmas-day—a real party, such as Fanny and Nellie had been dreaming of half their lives, and Agnes had undertaken to superintend matters from beginning to end.

For the first time a Christmas-tree had entered the house—a tall,

graceful fir-tree top, that seemed to have been taken straight out of a picture. Joshua had bought it himself in the Corn Market that morning, and it was pleasant to see him rubbing his thin white hands as he watched his children's eyes sparkle. This kind of satisfaction was new to him. For the greater part of his life he had—perhaps not quite consciously—looked upon women and children as creatures to be repressed—repressed as much as possible, and on every possible occasion. It rather surprised him to find they would bear quite another kind of treatment; it surprised him equally to find himself making the necessary experiments. He had been drawn into it unawares, and that niece of his, with her quiet smile and her gentle ways, was the magnet that had drawn him. He did not dislike her for it.

He could not keep away from the busy scene; that was also so pretty. He was not so much at ease as he tried to seem, but he was easier in that little room, where there was such pleasant ado about nothing, than he was anywhere else.

After tea, when it was quite dark, he took his hat and walked with great dignity across the square. There was a shop on the other side—not exactly a toy-shop, but a place where toys were to be had. Joshua went in, stayed a while, and came out behaving very pompously all through, and *bearing* rather than carrying his parcel as he might have borne the crown jewels.

Yet he could not prevent his eyes from twinkling, nor his hands from trembling a little as he undid the string. There was an exclamation that was almost a shout. Such glittering, sparkling treasures had surely never been provided for any Christmas-tree before! There were birds and flowers, fruit and fairies, crimson and gold, and silver and green; crystal lamps with real tapers in them, and colored flags of all nations. Sam, who was standing on the side-board, was in such hot haste to fasten a flag to the top of the tree that he put up the first he could reach; then there came a real shout from John.

“That will never do! Can't have the Stars and Stripes floating higher than the Union Jack! Here you are, Sam.”

Sam was still blushing, the younger ones laughing, the old man chuckling quietly, when the door opened and Julian came in, pale and weary-looking, but trying with what heart was left in him to get up a smile that should be equal to the occasion.

Nellie was perhaps his favorite sister, and he took her small brown head between his hands very tenderly.

“Oh, mind my hair, Julian,” she said (she was a neat, precise little thing)—“mind my hair, and *do* come and look; and don't be tired to-night. It *is* such fun!”

But Julian was very tired; you had only to look in his face to see that. Agnes only glanced at him, once, smiling a greeting to him in her own fascinating way. He smiled back, but very sadly; and his sadness deepened as she stood there watching her.

Yet he stood some time, appearing absent, but his brain was very busy.

One thought struck him like a blow—what if he should never stand there again?

He took in the scene in all its details, hardly knowing that he did

so. There was his father by the table, tall and gray, holding himself even more stiffly than usual, yet for the moment as much pleased in the children's pleasure as were the children themselves. By the fire his mother sat knitting, from time to time dropping stitches that Elizabeth had to take up again, or remarks that nobody thought it worth while to take up. In the middle of the room, now on this side of the laden branches, now on that, there was his betrothed Agnes—gracious, graceful, winning, as she always was, but seeming in some indefinite, sad way, at a new distance from him. Did she know it? Did she feel as he did? That could hardly be.

While he was thinking he was noting other and more trifling things that were about him; there was the old red chintz, the dingy carpet, the commonplace pictures. Then his eye rested on the cage where Sam's linnet hung, then on Sam himself. It did not seem so long since Julian had had linnets and thrushes of his own.

His memory was very vivid to-night, very clear, and opened her "folded annals" with a strange tenderness.

Was it not all a horrible nightmare that had happened lately? Could he not, if he strove sufficiently, free himself from the oppressive burden that lay on his heart and on his brain, crushing his life and his youth out of him with pitiless insistence?

He turned away sadly; and his father left the room at the same time.

"Julian," he said, making a rather futile effort to speak in a tone of unconcern—"Julian, I think there is a fire in the drawing-room; let us go up and see. I rather want to—to talk over some little matters."

Julian followed his father quite silently, but not without a certain uneasy fluttering of heart. Had the old man heard anything? Well, things could not go more hardly with him than they were going already.

But this fear passed away from him. His father's manner was almost deprecating.

"Sit down, Julian," he said—"sit down. We mustn't smoke here, I suppose, but we can manage without. It's very cold, though, isn't it? Come nearer the fire."

The elder man went on rubbing his hands in that nervous way of his; Julian was quite calm. "Whatever is, is bad, and any change is likely to be worse," he said to himself, quoting from a page of "Middlemarch," which he had glanced at as it lay on Mrs. Talbot's table. Its appropriateness to his own case had struck him at once; and he had said it over so often that he had begun to feel as if there were some kind of philosophy in it.

"You see we shall be going into the accounts presently," Mr. Serlcote began, in an uncertain tone, "and I thought we had better—well, better just talk over things, you know. You are three-and-twenty now, Julian. Time to take life a little—well, a little seriously, eh?"

Seriously! Julian put his hand up to his hot forehead and almost smiled. What could he say? Take life seriously, when for months past he had taken it as if he had been tottering in the dark on the edge of a precipice, knowing that nothing short of a miracle

could save him in the end. He had not had experience enough to know how many a time such divine miracles *are* wrought in this human world of ours. He had not faith enough to dream for a moment that such a miracle could happen to himself. He kept blindly to his perilous way, effortless, hopeless, prayerless. He would listen patiently to what his father might say; he would not vex him; he would try to part from him at least calmly.

"You see you have been engaged now over a year," Mr. Serlcote began again, timidly. "Of course you are young enough. I was some years older than you are when I married, and—and I don't wish to hurry you in such a matter, but I—I think something should be settled for your own sake as well as for Agnes'. What are your plans, Julian?"

Julian looked up, pale, bewildered, the sadness in his heart as plainly written on his face as it could well be.

What were his plans?

If he had answered the question honestly to his father, or even to himself, it is possible that that miracle of saving might have been wrought even at this eleventh hour.

"I have no very definite plans," he said, temporizingly. "My way is not clear to me at present."

"No, no, probably not—not to be expected," Joshua replied, hardly dissatisfied. "That was why I wished to see you this evening, Christmas Eve! Just the time when one feels inclined to see things made straight and pleasant. I hope next Christmas Eve will find you comfortably settled down here with your wife; and your mother and me comfortably settled at Elm House. I think of buying it, Julian. I set my heart on that house when I was quite a lad, and it has never been in the market since. I should like to die with fields and green trees all about me; I have always felt that. It will not cause me much pain to make a change that I have always looked forward to."

Julian's irresponsiveness had drawn the old man into soliloquy quite unawares. This was not at all the line he had intended to take. He had meant to be somewhat stern and more decisive in the beginning, to make his son to feel for a time that his conduct of late had periled his position. This done, he would unbend by degrees. Everything was arranged. The climax was to be one of the most effective points in Joshua Serlcote's history.

But his own nervousness and Julian's impassiveness had frustrated his plans altogether. He had surrendered without either demand or entreaty.

Once—it was just at this moment—that prodigal son of his was strangely near to confessing all that he had to confess. It was not pride that kept him back, nor hardness. There had never been anything either proud or hard about Julian Serlcote, and, now that he was broken in health and spirit, strength of impulse might at any moment have done the work that he should have had strength of soul for. His father's tremulousness had touched him, but at the same time it made him hesitate to strike so deep a blow as disclosure of the whole truth would inevitably inflict.

There is a superstition, beautiful enough, if one thinks of it, that an angel passes wherever there is silence. The angel that watched

the silence of Joshua Serlcote and his son must have passed away in tears.

"I shall take these things with me," said Joshua, glancing at the furniture. "I shall like to have them about me, and you will like to have new ones. I should say you might begin looking out for them any time. One can always get a thing cheaper and better when one isn't exactly wanting it. You will have to do things as cheaply as you can, Julian. Those alterations were a terrible business, and old Robertson wants a long price for Elm House. Two thousand five hundred, he says, but I can't give that; it's impossible. Much as I want the place, I don't think it will be possible for me to give more than two thousand pounds for it. Yet I don't know, I don't know. I *should* like to have it. I may offer another hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty."

Julian almost shivered at the remembrance of the words that had been well-nigh on his lips.

No other angel passed that way; there was no more still silence.

"So far as your own future is concerned—your immediate future, I mean," the old man went on, "I have come to a decision that I think will satisfy you. Remember that I have your sisters to think of and your two younger brothers. But what is it, Julian? what is the matter? Are you not well? Is it possible that you can't lend me your attention for half an hour, sir? that you can't even *feign* an interest in a matter so important to yourself as this?"

Julian's absence of mind had forced itself vexatiously upon his father's notice at last. Joshua was astounded on perceiving that his son was not even listening.

"What is it I demand?" he said, in tones that might have been imperious but for the broken quiver natural to his age. "What are you thinking of? What do you require? Have I not forgotten and forgiven more than any human being save yourself has dreamed of? Have I not planned for you and taken thought for you—who have never taken thought for yourself—when I should have been sleeping? Have I not brought you here to-night for the very purpose of telling you of the sacrifices that I am about to make for you? And how are you treating me? Where is your gratitude? One would have thought that a sense of the common civility due from one human being to another would have prevented you from behaving in this way. What do you mean, sir? You have not uttered a single word of agreement in anything that I have said."

Julian was still calm, calmer than before, and even more despairing. Nothing that he might do or leave undone, say or leave unsaid, could make much difference now.

"I have not spoken because I did not wish to vex you," he said, in the soft, sympathetic voice that always moved his father. "And there was another reason, I did not wish to imply anything that might—that might not be true."

"Quite right, quite right! But I do not understand you in the least. Speak out and speak plainly. Nothing that you can say will annoy me as your indifference has annoyed me."

"It was not indifference, quite the reverse. I was thinking of something that will probably distress you; it distresses me, but I am doing it for the best, because I think it kindest and most honor-

able. It was my intention, it *is* my intention, to release Agnes from her engagement this evening."

Julian spoke firmly, and looked up firmly to his father's face when he had finished speaking.

He long remembered that moment—the sudden crimson that spread over the old man's countenance and under his white hair, the fierce light that shot from his keen eyes, the strange twitching of the muscles about his mouth as he spoke.

"Then you shall leave my house this evening," he said, rising to his feet, speaking with passionate vehemence, "and I will look my last upon your face this evening."

Julian rose too, pallid, rigid, silent.

"I suppose this has been brought about by that woman who lives in the Grove," Joshua resumed, with the same uncontrolled violence of tone and manner. "I have heard of her, and I have heard of you. I know more than you think. But believe me or not as you choose, I mean what I say. I will disinherit you before I sleep, unless you recall the word you said just now. Will you do this, or will you not?"

"I *can not* do it."

"Then neither can I unsay what I have said. You will leave my house to-night. I will not sleep under the same roof again with such a dastard as I now know you to be."

Joshua knew that these last words had been heard by ears they were not intended for. Julian knew it too. They had seen Agnes enter the room, pale, wondering, tremulous; but Joshua had not refrained from expressing his decision.

Julian had nothing to gain by hesitancy, or by concealment of his intention toward Agnes.

"Have you heard what my father has said?" he began, turning to her. "He has not spoken without reason. I had told him that I meant to ask you to consider yourself free from the engagement that has existed between us. I think you will not be so much surprised as he appears to be. The time is not far distant when you will be grateful. There is more that might be said, but I can not say it now. I can only say 'Good-by.' Forgive me, Agnes, and forget me."

He held out his hand, and she gave him hers mechanically, not knowing the thing that she did, nor attaching meaning to the words that she heard. She was unused to scenes like this. It could not be that either her uncle or Julian was in earnest. People often said things in anger that were not intended to be taken literally. She was still looking on in the same uncomprehending way. Julian turned sadly from her to his father, holding out his hand again.

"Will you shake hands with me, father?"

"Never; never while you live, unless you undo the deed you have done to-day."

Joshua Serlcote stood there, erect in his pride and his anger, stricken in heart with a yet unrealized disappointment, and only half-conscious of the import of what had been said and done. It is probable that he was as far as Agnes was from believing in any finiteness of result likely to follow this quarrel with his son; but he

was a man who prided himself on keeping his word. It was for Julian to consider the consequences.

Julian had already left the house; just as he stood he had gone, snatching his hat from the peg as he went rapidly through the passage, turning neither to the right nor to the left. His father's refusal to shake hands with him had struck him hardly; dead as he was to feeling of almost every kind he yet felt this.

The angry flush of color died rapidly from the old man's face after the sound of the closing door had fallen upon his ear. He sat down, pale, bewildered, stunned. The suddenness, the unexpectedness of this conclusion to the long-deferred interview with his son was overwhelming. He put out his thin nervous-looking hand as Agnes went up to him with a gesture that was unspeakably touching. It felt very chill and lifeless, and Agnes took it between her own two warm ones and held it comfortingly. It was a little ease to herself.

Joshua watched her as she sat on a low stool at his feet, betraying her suffering only by her silence. She looked up at him once trying to smile, but the expression that was on her simple innocent face would have suited tears better.

"Never mind, my child; never mind," he said, laying one hand tenderly upon her head. "You are young, very young, you will get over it; and I—I—"

"And you will get over it, too," she said, softly, and believing the words she said. "We shall all get over it. Julian will come back, I know he will come back; and you will forgive him. Say that you will forgive him, I shall feel happier if you will say it."

"I can not say it, I can not say it," the old man replied with agitation. "I have forgiven so much, more than you know of, more than I can tell you. Forgive! How *can* we forgive a person who doesn't even desire forgiveness, who goes on sinning against one, time after time? How oft shall I forgive him?"

Agnes looked up quickly; she felt that her uncle was not intending to ask the question as Peter asked it, yet surely the reply that was made to Peter might also be made to him. "What was meant," she gently asked, "by 'seventy times seven'?"

Joshua hesitated a while. Agnes' presence, her voice, the fact that she was pleading for one who had tried her heart's strength to the very uttermost—these things were tending more forcibly than he was aware of to prevent that hardening of himself against his son that he had meditated.

"I suppose that forgiveness without limit was meant," he said, thoughtfully. "But it is a hard saying—until to-night I never knew how hard."

"Yet not impossible."

"Perhaps not. If it is not impossible to you it certainly ought not to be to me. But of what use is forgiveness? It is too late. He took advantage of me. He stung me into anger, and then took me at my word almost before it had left my lips. If he says that I turned him to the door I can only say from the bottom of my heart that I believe he wanted to go. Agnes, where is he gone? Do you think he *will* come back? You said just now you thought so; what made you say so?"

Already change was stealing upon him, resistlessly, pitifully. His son had had temptations, unusual temptations, he acknowledged to himself; and perhaps there were others who had been more to blame than he had been. He could not talk to Agnes of Mrs. Talbot, but he thought about her a good deal; and knowing no other cause of Julian's conduct this evening he attributed all to her. The boy was infatuated, he could in a measure understand that, he could even understand that such an infatuation should for a time seem stronger than the purer and holier and more natural love that ought to have been all-sufficient for him, that doubtless would have been sufficient but for the wiles and art of a woman who could find no more congenial pastime than trifling with human affection.

Joshua Serlcote was not far from the truth here; he saw further and more clearly than Julian himself had seen.

Of late, as we know, other troubles had beset Julian, beset him so grievously that his love for Agnes, his foolish and absurd fancy for Helena Talbot, had alike remained in abeyance. The latter had flared up a little wildly now and then, more especially in Mrs. Talbot's presence. There had been something about her condescension that touched more than his vanity; and more than his vanity had been wounded by that change in her on the evening when Dr. Sargent so unexpectedly came upon the scene. He had not seen her since—hardly a week had passed—but he had not troubled himself about her so much as might have been expected. He had surprised himself in this—what capacity he had for suffering, and it was not a little, had been claimed by other and more momentous matters.

Of all this Agnes knew nothing. She could have borne to know better than she bore the conjecture. The hints that Julian had dropped were very pregnant for her, and afforded a vast field for sad imagining. Let it be remembered that she was only a woman, and a very young one, and that her experience of life had been of the simplest. She was not even "clever," in the modern sense of the word. Girls of her age sometimes startle one nowadays with their gifts of speculation, their large tolerance, their knowledge of the world and its ways, and their surface acquaintance with the cheaper philosophies; but Agnes had not reached even the first stage of "emancipation." For her sin was sin, and sorrow was sorrow, and love was love. Life seemed to be made up of these three things, and they were so interwoven with each other now as to appear almost one. She sat there silently at her uncle's feet, thinking, wondering, yearning, suffering—suffering, only God knew how intensely. She could make no cry, not even a secret one for her own relief. It was not resignation that was in her soul, that she knew; resignation might come later. At present nothing save this utter aching silence seemed in any way possible.

CHAPTER IX.

BELLS AT MIDNIGHT.

“There’s naught so monstrous but the mind of man,
 In some conditions, may be brought to approve;
 Theft, sacrilege, treason, and parricide,
 When flattering opportunity enticed,
 And desperation drove, have been committed
 By those who once would start to hear them named.”

IF I were a clever modern medical man, and engaged to give evidence on behalf of Julian Serlcote, I could—I have no hesitation in saying it—invent yet another new mental disease, bestow a scientific-sounding name upon it, and finally state the rationale of the case in such plausible language that not even the Home Secretary should be able to resist conviction.

If there could be any doubt of Julian’s sanity on that Christmas Eve let him have the benefit of the doubt, and think pityingly of the ignorance that permitted him, that permits so many thousands of others, to

“Confuse the chemic labor of their blood”

with stimulants of unknown composition. Be it remembered that his wines had not been chosen from a carefully-stocked cellar, but supplied to him from the bar of a country inn, the landlord of the said inn not being noted for his skill or taste in such matters. In the present state of physiology it would be difficult to say exactly what amount of confusion of nerve and brain may be induced by the perpetual presence in the veins of such powerful irritants as are nowadays used in adulteration—acts of parliament notwithstanding. Whether this mode of accounting for the utter derangement of thought and life which had driven Julian Serlcote to his ruin be tenable or not, need not be discussed here; we have only to do with the sad fact that he had been brought to ruin.

He was afflicted and distressed in mind, body, and estate; and where to turn in his distress he knew not—nay, he hardly cared to know.

Of course it was not in that first moment after he left his father’s house that he knew the full meaning of what he had done; yet the moment was painful enough in its way.

It could not be said that he was penniless, he had half-a-crown in his pocket, enough to justify him in entering once more the hospitable doors of the Westminster, and calling for half a pint of sherry. He knew it was a reckless act, but his mood was much too reckless for acts of any other kind.

The first effect of the stimulant was to make him feel calmer, somewhat more capable of clear and steady thought. He decided that he would first go up to the Grove and say “good-by” to Mrs. Talbot; then he would call at Whitehouse’s and borrow enough money to pay his fare to London, not saying where he was going. The night train stopped at Elmthorpe junction for a few minutes

some time about two o'clock in the morning; he would have plenty of time to walk over after midnight.

His plans went no further than that; but it was a relief to him that the next step was plain before him; it was more than a relief that that next step should lead to Mrs. Talbot's.

The drawing-room window was close to the front door. She was singing in that pathetic voice of hers, and it seemed even more pathetic than usual. The old spell stole over him, irresistibly, incomprehensibly. Was she alone? he wondered, as he went in with a certain trembling about the heart. The light dazzled him for a moment after the intense darkness of the world outside. The maid opened the door so gently that Mrs. Talbot was not aware of Julian's entrance. There was no one else in the room. She was seated at the piano singing softly,

"Return, return! my spirit yearns for thine;
Return, and tell me that thou still art mine!"

She did not start nor blush when Julian moved forward; she only rose and greeted him quietly, but her beautiful eyes were suffused with tears—this he saw with a distress that made him forget his own distresses. Her song was still in his ear. There must have been meaning in it for her, and not for her only. Whose return had she been yearning for with such cruel yearning as this? He dared not think it was his own; he could not bear to think that it was another's.

These and other thoughts flashed vaguely through his brain, and he stood there silently holding her hand. She did not withdraw it. Her face was a little averted, her tears dropped slowly. Julian did not know that crying was one of the sweets of her existence, that she could sit down and play and sing and weep whenever life offered nothing more scenic in the way of emotion. It was all real to him, intensely real this evening. He was already less master of himself than he had been a quarter of an hour before.

"What is it?" he said, in a tender tone, and still standing there by her in an attitude of tenderness. "Has anything troubled you?"

"Troubled me?" she exclaimed, sinking gracefully into a chair, and not unmindful of the effect of the floating folds of her dress. "Everything troubles me that disturbs my calmness. I have no happiness in life; I desire none. All I ask is peace, peace with neither pain nor pleasure in it. It is not much to ask. Why is it that one may not have it?"

"Are you quite sure that you do not desire happiness?" Julian asked, tremulously, disregarding her question. He drew his chair nearer to hers as he spoke, with a decisive movement. "Were you not wishing for something when I came in? If you had not meant the words you were singing they would not have moved you thus."

"Probably not," she said, with some confusion. She was drying her tears with an exquisite lace handkerchief, and a faint blush was rising to her face. "Quite probably not. One does not always know what is in one's own heart. Sometimes other people's words seem to find things there that startle one's self."

Julian was listening keenly enough, but he made no reply. It could hardly be said that he was thinking; it was not thought that

was taking possession of him, confusing his brain, heightening the spell of that strange infatuation that had so long darkened his understanding. To himself it seemed as if a sudden blinding light had fallen upon that gloomy prospect of his, a light that he might have seen before if he had only been courageous enough to look toward it.

"No, one does not always know what is in one's heart," he said, speaking with much embarrassment. "But I know of something that has been in mine a long time, something that I have kept back, and tried to put away from me with all the strength I had; but it was no use. I have never had any hope. I never should have had any if I had not come in to-night."

Then he paused a little. Though Mrs. Talbot and he had been friends so long, and although their friendship had had a certain dangerous flavor of tenderness in it, he yet felt a difficulty in putting this new hope of his into words. It was rather cruel, too, that just at this moment the remembrance of his last visit, and its termination, should flash suddenly upon him, impeding his utterance but strengthening his wish. He would have an answer; he must have one now that he had gone so far; but the moment was far from being so ecstatic as such moments are supposed to be.

He had a vague desire that Mrs. Talbot would help him; but she seemed embarrassed herself. She did not speak, but she looked at him, first in some surprise, then in a helpless, appealing way, as if she would implore him to be silent.

But of course silence was not possible, nor did Julian wish that it were.

"I know that it is presumption on my part," he began again, more tremulously than before, "and I have no excuse to offer for it but my love. It has been yours a long time, longer than you dream."

He was looking at her eagerly as he spoke; looking more passionate and tender things than it was possible to utter. As he concluded he again took her hand in his. She did not refuse to let it lie there, but she gave a nervous little start, as if she were only just awaking from a reverie.

"Oh, Mr. Serlcote! What are you saying?" she exclaimed. "Love! Are you talking of love to me? Do you forget yourself? Or is it possible that you are insulting me? Are you not engaged to your cousin? Of what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking of you, and of my love for you," he said, firmly. "My engagement with my cousin is broken off; *that* can not come between us. Tell me—tell me at once that nothing else can."

There was a certain vehemence in his tone, born quite as much of his desperate situation as of the intensity of his affection.

Mrs. Talbot had covered her face with her hands, and hot genuine tears were streaming through her fingers. Julian spoke soothingly, caressingly, but he could draw no word from her until she had recovered herself somewhat. He never knew the meaning of those tears, he never guessed the struggle that had taken place between Helena Talbot's heart and brain during those few minutes that seemed an hour.

"You foolish, foolish boy!" she said, at last, "How can you be

so thoughtless as to make fresh trouble both for yourself and me? Sorrow is new to you, though; I dare say it will be a kind of luxury. But, alas! alas! it is a luxury which I have had enough. How could you, how could you bring me more?"

"Why do you say that?" Julian asked, his hope already beginning to fail. "Is it that you do not care for me! I—I have thought that you did. And you said only a little while ago that people often had feeling in their hearts that they did not expect. You have been my friend so long—surely I am something to you?"

"Something? Yes, you are something—much, perhaps more than older and wiser friends would exactly approve; but—it is the greatest kindness I can do you to tell you the truth—we can never be more than friends."

Poor Julian! The tragic speech was altogether tragic to him.

"Don't say that! don't say that!" he cried, in a kind of weak abandonment of himself. "I am in trouble—in great trouble; I have not a friend in the world; I have not even a home! If not for love's sake, then for pity's sake think twice before you send me away to-night hopeless!"

In the midst of Helena Talbot's surprise came the contemptuous thought, "How *young* he is."

Yes, very young to dream of moving a woman like that by confession of trouble and poverty!

She did not even inquire into the details of his trouble—nay, she even shrunk from knowing them. She suddenly became conscious that the scene had been prolonged beyond the limits of expediency.

"Perhaps I ought to have told you in the beginning," she said, turning away as if to hide a blush, "but these things come upon one so suddenly, and—and it is not pleasant for me to tell you myself—I meant Dr. Sargent to tell you as soon as we told any one—you will come to see us in our new home?—we are going to live at Grayford Mount."

Julian Serlcote rose to his feet involuntarily. For some time he stood there, with one hand on the table and his head lowered a little. He did not speak or stir, but a curious change passed over his face. Long afterward he remembered that his first coherent thought was of the utter hopelessness and desperateness of his circumstances.

The thoughts—if such they could be called—that followed later were less intelligible even to himself. It is probable that he did not stand there five minutes, but the history of each minute, could he have written it, would have resembled the history of each hour of a revolution.

Whatever may have been the nature of his affection or infatuation for Mrs. Talbot, he knew certainly that it came to an end even as he stood there in her presence. If she could have known it she could not have been more astonished than he was.

The poets have written much on the sudden birth of love, we have heard, but little of its sudden death. Some of them—Byron for instance—have doubted whether such sudden death were possible. It may be granted that Byron was an authority on such subjects, but there are various chords of human emotion that he never swept. The instantaneous and unexpected death of love is less frequent but not less possible than its instantaneous birth.

A flash of event, betraying, were it but for a second, the double nature of a man or woman, revealing but in a single word unsuspected undercurrents of meaner and smaller mindedness, may be as quickly fatal to love as ever lightning was to life.

Julian uttered no word of reproach, he was too much confused to be able to adjust for himself the knowledge of Mrs. Talbot's real character that had come to him so suddenly and painfully. More had been revealed than he could grasp. Afterward, when he went over the whole of the time that he had known her, it seemed to him that his faith in womanhood was shaken forever.

But even as he stood in her drawing-room, transfixed with surprise, his feeling resolved itself into anger, and something that was almost repugnance. Why had she let him betray himself so far? Had she anticipated pleasure in his shame and disappointment?

He could not control himself sufficiently to part from her with any courtesies. He was wounded and stung beyond endurance. Any one seeing him fly down the avenue, with his hat in his hand, might have been forgiven for doubting his sanity.

It was a dark, moonless night; chill winds swept over the rising land where the Grove houses stood, looming up at intervals from the stunted, leafless trees; heavy clouds were sailing over the stars; there were lights in the windows here and there. At a turn in the lane the more numerous lights of the town caught Julian's eye, giving him a sense of the nearness of humanity that he could not bear just then. He turned back and went along a narrow field-path that led into the open country. He might not escape from himself, but his instinct to escape from all besides was irresistible.

No; he might not escape from himself—from the cruel net-work of evil that he had woven about his own feet.

He went on, desperate, and unconsciously nursing his desperation. He could not think, he could not realize his position; he could not feel. He was simply suffering from the sense of suffering. If that terrible fortune of his had been reversed he would still for some time have been dominated by the oppression that was upon him.

But no such reverse was possible. This he knew, and it was almost all that he did know. He had forgotten his plans; he knew nothing of the lapse of time. The night went on, the stars shone down upon him more clearly, the wind died away, and still Julian Serlcote was wandering alone in the fields beyond Lyme-St.-Mary's.

After a time the recollection came back upon him of what he had intended to do. He shivered. It was like a blast of keener air. He retraced his steps, and turned into a road that led to White-house's.

He was soon there, but there was no sign of life about the place. The stillness, the death-like gloom of his friend's closed doors, was like another chill. He moved away slowly and altogether aimlessly. He might not go far; he might come back; he had no definite purpose as he went slowly toward the town.

Suddenly—he never forgot that moment—the bells from the old church tower rang cut through the midnight air.

He was not far from the church, and every stroke fell upon the silence with a power that was startling and terrible. Julian re-

membered that it was Christmas Eve, that the chimes were intended for sounds of most joyous and holy significance; he even stopped and tried to listen for any higher meaning they might have, but it was not for him. The bells were old and grand and true; there had been times when their music had seemed to him something glad and exulting beyond all other music. Quiet Sunday morning chimes, marriage bells, other festival chimes that had rung out sweetly and merrily from the ancient tower, came back upon him, came mingled with the strange heavy clanging discord that seemed to strike his every nerve with a sense of fear and horror.

He had heard funeral bells, muffled peals of sorrow and sadness, but they had never filled him with such dread as this dread that stole over him as he listened now. For the first time his despair seemed to come home to him. He sunk down on a doorstep not a hundred yards from his father's house, and he sat on that doorstep and cried—wept such tears as a human being only can weep who has forsaken God and bereaved himself of the sympathy of man.



CHAPTER X.

AN OLD MAN'S SORROW AND A YOUNG MAN'S SIN.

Blot out this name, then—record one lost soul more,
One task more declined, one more footpath untrod;
One more triumph for devils, and sorrow for angels,
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God.

ROBERT BROWNING.

THAT Christmas Eve was a sorrowful one for others besides Julian Serlcote.

The chimes, falling upon Agnes' ear, caused a pang well-nigh as bitter in its way as the pang that struck through Julian's heart as he stood in the cold, dark street, friendless and homeless and penniless. Her sorrow was not unmingled with self-reproach. What earthly sorrow ever is? Failings, errors, deficiencies came back upon her as she sat there; opportunities lost, perhaps forever, she said to herself, realizing the idea with pain of unutterable force.

She could sit still no longer, but began to pace up and down her room rapidly. Her hands were crossed tightly before her; her beautiful hair, dark, waving, abundant, fell over her white gown; her upturned face was tearless, intense, weighted as if with years of grief and yearning.

The feeling that her sorrow was chastisement for her sin was not the most intolerable feeling that she had. She could have bowed herself to that with submission. Her grief went further, went out from her own heart and life to the wrecked life of another. What might not she have done? or rather, what might not God have done? She had prayed, but how? As Jacob prayed at Peniel, or as the woman of Canaan prayed by the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

Her faith had declined; this she knew as she remembered how week by week and month by month, as Julian's steady deterioration had forced itself upon her notice, she had come to feel despondent, if not hopeless. Could God work a miracle? She had half shuddered as the question had involuntarily crossed her mind, as such

questions will. Beyond doubt, He could work any miracle He might see fit to work, even to the changing of the very foundations upon which a human character had been built. It was not impossible that He should do it yet.

"O for a love like Daniel's now,
To wing to heaven but one short prayer."

So she cried aloud in that midnight agony of hers, and her crying did not end there.

She knew not how it ended, when the sense that it had been heard came to her; she only knew that it came softly, and imperceptibly, and with unspeakable sweetness.

It was as the folding of an angel's wing about her head; shutting out fear and pain and visions of evil; enveloping her in its atmosphere of utter peace.

The peace that passeth all understanding. Even in that hour of her trial this peace was hers. No human voice sung the glad tidings in her ear, no illuminated scroll was unrolled before her eyes.

Peace on earth for those who will accept it; good will to all, whether they respond to it or no. That was the message of the night.

Not freedom from sorrow, from care, from trial; nowhere is such a promise made to man: but this promise is given firmly: "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy."

Your sorrow itself made an occasion of joy to you, if you will have it so—your saddest bereavement, your most terrible poverty, your longest loneliness, age, and even your deepest disgrace.

He who was despised and rejected of men, that Man of Sorrow who was so acquainted with grief, has only one motive in subjecting us to the same training as He chose for Himself. He who was made perfect through sufferings will have us perfect through sufferings also.

Stroke upon stroke, loss upon loss, denial upon denial, till the human heart in us stands still as much in amazement as in sorrow.

We have ceased to ask *why?* long ago—we have ceased to question at all. What strength we have is all laid down in endurance. Yet God stays not His uplifted hand. His purpose is not yet accomplished.

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him"—there have been times in the lives of some of us not to be forgotten while memory remains, when we have been brought near enough to the foot of the Cross to utter this in all sincerity.

"Though he slay *me*."

Could we have said with equal emphasis, "Though he slay *my will*"?

That man who can offer up his own will—the desire, the hope, the solace that is dear to him as existence itself, that is woven with his very being—who can offer this as Abraham offered Isaac, not looking with longing eyes toward the thicket, watching for any substitute caught there, that man is not far from the peace that passeth knowledge.

Such a state is not arrived at suddenly. There may be a moment when the germ of faith shall seem first to awaken the soul; but it

awaits development, it needs storm and rain and patient culture: then God will not fail to provide.

* * * * *

Joshua Serlcote went down-stairs earlier than usual on the morning of that Christmas Day. He had had a restless, fevered night, and now he felt exhausted, irritable. He would not allow himself to think of that Absalom of his, he would never deliberately think of him again. All the same, it was quite useless trying to think of anything else.

Joshua was very methodical in his habits. He turned along the narrow bare passages that were still in semi-darkness. He could only just discern his way to the door that led into the shop, a door that was half of glass, and had a faded curtain behind it. The key was in his right hand, and his left hand was upon the lock; but the door yielded almost before he touched it; it had been standing ajar.

A faint sickening sensation passed over the old man; for a moment he could neither move nor think. He had intended to go for his letters which were in a box at the back of the street door of the shop; but he forgot all about the letters. When he had recovered himself he turned into the kitchen.

There was only Hannah there on her knees before the kitchen fire. A candle was on the table: Joshua was taking it tremulously.

"Are you ill, sir?" asked the girl, rising to her feet with quick surprise and sympathy.

"No, no, it's nothing, nothing at all. But come and hold the candle for me."

Just at that moment Martin came down, dressed with extra care as befitted Christmas Day; but there was no festive expression on his face.

"A happy Christmas, uncle," he said, holding out his hand, but his breathing seemed to stop suddenly, almost before the words were out of his mouth. "What is it? What is the matter?" he asked, turning almost as pale as Joshua himself.

"I—I don't know," said the old man, holding up the candle so that its light fell upon the glass door. "Look there, Martin, look at that. I found that door open, just as it is now."

Then he stooped; Martin was taking a key from the door.

"Julian's key," he said, holding it up, and speaking in a soothing explanatory way. Martin did not know all that had taken place on the previous evening.

What Joshua Serlcote did after that he seemed to do resolutely but altogether mechanically. He dismissed the servant, he bade Martin follow him into the shop, then he set himself to the task of discovering the worst.

He glanced at the safes first; they were both exactly as he had left them on the previous evening. The keys were in his own hand.

The desk and everything about it was undisturbed.

Then he walked down the long, dark shop; his step was less stately than usual and his bearing less erect; but there was determination in his every movement, and in every line of his face.

He did not falter even when he came to the counter near the door.

Two small glass-covered cases, lined with white satin, were standing there empty.

Joshua had been the last to leave the shop on the previous evening. He had an amusing little habit of going round the place and touching every precious or super-satisfactory article with gentle, caressing fingers, exactly as one would touch the cheek of an unusually lovely child. Joshua Serlcote patting the sides of a silver tea-pot with an affectionate smile was one of the numerous things that invariably proved irresistible to Ben Chadwick. Ben had not been present on Christmas Eve when Joshua had lingered lovingly beside these cases; they had contained eleven watches, each one of more than ordinary beauty and value.

Martin moved gently back to the glass door, closed it, and came again to his uncle's side, standing a little nearer to him than before.

"Tell Hannah I want her here immediately," said the old man, hoarsely, and without looking up.

Martin hesitated. "Will it be wise, uncle?" he said, speaking with all possible gentleness. "Things may clear themselves up in a day or two."

"Will you do as you are ordered, sir, or will you not?"

Martin did as he was ordered, and Hannah appeared on the strange dimly-lighted scene quickly. Her natural curiosity seemed to be overawed by some influence not yet explained.

Joshua moved the candle so that it fell full upon her face.

"These premises have been entered during the night," he began, with a certain grandiloquence: "I have every reason to believe that they have been entered by my son Julian. I wish to know whether you can throw any light upon the matter. In the first place, were the doors and windows at the back of the house all fastened as usual when you came down this morning?"

"Exactly as usual, sir; but—"

"Wait, wait! Speak only when you are spoken to. Did you hear any noise during the night?"

"I never heard nothing after I went upstairs, sir."

"What time was it when you went upstairs?"

Hannah blushed and hesitated. "It was going on for four o'clock this morning," she said, at last, speaking out boldly; "an' I shouldn't ha' been up that time of the mornin' if I'd been allowed proper time for sewin' as other servants is."

"Stop, stop, my good woman!" said Joshua; "I have nothing to do with that now. Did you see or hear anything of any one before you went to bed?"

"Yes; I both saw and heard Mr. Julian."

"What time was it?"

"About three."

"Did you let him in?"

"Yes: I let him in—an' I let him out again."

"How long was he in?"

"Not more than ten minutes, an' he hardly spoke. He went into the shop, but he hardly made no noise at all. He never so much as said 'at I wasn't to tell nobody he'd been in.'"

"That will do, that will do! You can go back to your work now."

"Give her a word of caution about speaking of this," implored Martin, in a whisper.

"Not a syllable, not a syllable!" said the old man, sternly.

He would make no hue and cry, this he had decided already; but neither would he so much as raise his finger to insure concealment. A little more or less scandal could make no matter now. If the thing could have been managed so that no one should have known save himself, who had been sinned against, and his son, who had sinned, it would have made no difference. It would be no more possible for Julian to take his position again than it would have been possible for him to come back from death to life.

Poor old Serlcote! It was as if an earthquake had opened the ground under his feet; as if the walls that made his house and home were tottering; as if only ruin and degradation could be the lot of him and his forever.

He sat with his bowed head between his hands, trying to soothe its hot aching by pressure, trying to relieve his troubled senses by rocking himself slowly to and fro. Martin had wisely left him alone with his great grief. Daylight came slowly through the wide, low window behind him, the candle burnt down into its socket, sounds reached him from the house and from the street, still it was a hard matter for him to raise that white head of his and face life again, knowing so certainly as he did that he could never face it as he had done before.

Martin's trouble was great, but it was not as his uncle's trouble. He was younger and more sanguine; besides, he had known so much more of Julian's desperate position that he was less surprised. His one present idea was secrecy. If his uncle would do nothing to insure that, then he would do all that could be done himself.

Hannah was easily bribed. The girl was in tears when Martin went into the kitchen, and laboring under an uneasy sense of error which she was altogether unable to define. She gave a fuller account to Martin than Joshua had permitted her to give, but she had no new light to throw upon the matter. Mr. Julian had startled her by tapping at the kitchen window; she recognized his voice when he spoke, and opened the door for him without hesitation, supposing that he had forgotten his latch-key. She had not known till then that Mr. Serlcote had barred the side-door when he went to bed.

No, she would not tell any one, she said, closing her hand with a good deal of reluctance over the sovereign that Martin insisted on placing there; and as for telling Miss Dyne, that she would never have dreamed of. Martin was very emphatic here, and repeated his injunction with a certain amount of embarrassment.

After a time he went back to the shop to plead with his uncle, and his effort was not altogether wasted. Joshua agreed that it would avail little to plunge the whole household into the depths of a misery that they could barely understand, and could in no wise alleviate. Martin quickly put the empty cases out of sight, and persuaded his uncle to take his place at the breakfast-table as usual. It was better that he did so; but the trouble that had fallen upon him passed through the others as an electric shock passes. They dared not ask

what new thing had happened, nor could they talk of indifferent things. Altogether that Christmas Day was as the day when one lies newly dead in a house.

By degrees it came to be understood, even by the little ones, and without any openly uttered word, that Julian's return was not to be looked for. Joshua insisted that the children's party, for which the invitations had already been issued, should be given as originally planned, on the day after Christmas Day. He even forced himself to be present, and strove to the uttermost to put away from him that dark shadow that had fallen into his life. No one knew the effort it cost him, because it was felt that such an occasion would have been rather trying to him in his brightest days. His smile had never been a happy one, nor his manner easy. If there was more pathos in his endeavor to seem easy and happy it is probable that no one noticed it save his niece, who was herself under the necessity of making a certain amount of effort. The need for it passed away as the evening went on. Her nature was one of those whose darkest troubles are lightened by children's mirth.

Children of all ages and both sexes were there, bright merry little things, whose untroubled faces and free glad laughter came into that sad household like a breeze from the hills into a close hot city, or like a flood of sunshine into a darkened room. Fanny and Nellie, dressed in new white muslin dresses and crimson sashes, gave themselves up at once and without reserve; Sam, who was timid and shy, yielded more slowly. John, who was growing tall, and had been promoted that very evening to a dress-coat and a white tie, looked grave and conscious, but it might be that his promotion was slightly oppressive. Elizabeth's pleasant homely face showed no sign of sadness; she rustled awkwardly about in her mauve silk dress, which was amply trimmed with white imitation lace, but her smiles were not so unforced as they seemed to be. Mrs. Serlcote was the only fretful person present. She resented all attention, more especially the attention of her husband and Agnes. She had a very firm impression that her son had not been dealt with fairly.

The giving out of the presents from the Christmas tree by lottery was the grand feature of the evening. The presiding genius seemed to be in a perverse mood. Joshua received a tiny silver thimble, Elizabeth a walking-stick, and Martin Brooke a doll dressed as a fairy. Then, when the laughter was loudest, a heavy distressing sob was heard, a sob that hushed every other sound at once, and drew every eye to the shadowy corner behind the tree. There was only little Nellie there, Nellie who had been the brightest and merriest of the whole party. It was all so new to her, so delightful, so different from all the other days of her prosaic little life, that it was not to be wondered at that she had forgotten the existence of any such thing as sorrow. She might have continued to forget, but her eyes had fallen on a cigar-case that she had bought with her own money. It had not been put into the lottery; she had wished to be quite sure of its reaching the person for whom it was designed. In her excitement she had glanced round the room for him; then she had remembered, and the remembrance was more than she was able to bear.

"Oh, what is it? What is the matter?" came from all sides.

The child in her distress only sobbed out quietly, "Julian would have liked it so."

Agnes drew the little thing to her side comfortingly, and Martin, with quiet prescience, made an attempt to go on at once with the giving out of the presents. But this was not to be. Emotion had grasped Joshua Serlcote with a stronger grasp than he was able to shake off. He had turned while, or rather gray, and he was trembling visibly. For a moment he could not speak, but he was conscious that every one was watching him, wondering at his weakness. And the consciousness lent to his emotion the strength and appearance of anger.

"Ellen," he said, speaking sharply and hardly. "Ellen, leave the room at once; but before you go hear this, and let every one else hear it." Then he stopped and drew himself up to his full height, and raised his hand as if in denunciation. "Let every one present listen to this, and remember it; that I forbid any human being ever to mention my son Julian's name to me again. I disown him. From this hour I cast him off forever."

More than this the old man might have said, but Agnes laid her hand gently on his outstretched arm. He turned, and saw the sad pleading look that was yet full of sweetness, and his anger seemed to die out as suddenly as it had arisen. Nellie was going sobbing from the room, but he brought her back, and went out himself instead.

Elizabeth, Agnes, and Martin made every possible effort to restore the easy, natural mirth of the previous hours, but their success was only partial. Some of the elder children never forgot the consternation that seized them that evening when Joshua Serlcote thus publicly cast off his son, the young man whom they had looked up to with such keen and unfailing admiration. It touched them as, generally speaking, only personal things touch the very young.

Meanwhile Joshua Serlcote had shut himself up in his own room, and walking up and down there in the darkness, twining his hands tightly together, uttering broken words, fighting against the strange sorrow that had come upon him with all the strength he had. He went back over the past, over the days of Julian's childhood and boyhood and his early youth; he remembered his own kindnesses and indulgences; he recalled things that he had done many a time with outward bad grace because they were so directly opposed to all his theories, but in which he had found compensating internal satisfaction because they were done for Julian. What had he not done for him? He had given him superior advantages in the way of education; year after year he had increased his allowance; and he had sent him abroad at great expense and inconvenience to himself. Since his return had he not treated him more like a superior than like a son? Julian's time had been his own, his expenditure had seemed almost unlimited, and when reproof and remonstrance became duties that could no longer be delayed, had he not tried to the uttermost to prevent himself from using any word that should even savor of harshness? As to forgiveness, he had been impelled to forgive him even when he had half scorned himself for his own weakness in so doing. A word, a look of Julian's had at any time been sufficient to neutralize the secretly nourished soreness and re-

sentment of days. "But now—now it is all over," the old man said to himself, sinking into a chair. Then the tears began to fall, hot, bitter tears that dropped slowly over his withered face, and two tremulous hands were stretched out imploringly in the darkness. "Julian, Julian," the old man said aloud, "I could have borne it if I had not loved you so. I could have borne even this if I had not loved you."

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After that day a calmer sadness settled down upon the household in the Corn Market. The elder members felt that there was some mystery, that something had come to light after Julian's departure of which his father and Martin knew, but there seemed to be a tacit agreement among them that it was better to let it remain a mystery so far as themselves were concerned. It was very pathetic the way they dreaded being compelled to think with anything but tenderness and affection of that wandering prodigal of theirs. They only spoke of him at night round the fire, when tears might fall unobserved, and whispers be heard without effort. Agnes was the only hopeful one among them. Her hope was distant and undefined, but it was not the less a strong hope.

"He will come back," she said, gently, "and his father will receive him."

The others listened doubtfully, almost despairingly. This was especially true of Martin. He could not help looking wistfully at Agnes as she spoke, and wondering what she would think and feel if she knew all. He did not know that he himself did not know all, that Julian's debts, strange, inexplicable debts, were daily coming to his father's knowledge. The old man paid them quickly and secretly and silently, but, unknown to himself, his heart was hardening rapidly in the process. That matter of Grant & Greenlow's was as keen a blow in its way as was the more direct robbery of Christmas Eve. The knowledge that Julian had been willfully and recklessly deceiving him almost ever since his return from the Continent was almost unbearable to a man so stern-principled as Joshua Serlcote. He could not forget, he could not forgive. He had no wish to forgive now that all tenderness was dead or dying within him. No one, not even his own wife, had dared to mention his son's name to him since that sad evening. It was seen by every one that he was growing rapidly older and sterner and more silent. The few people who knew his sorrow and sympathized with it yet avoided the man who sorrowed so hardily and proudly.

Of course the tragic occurrences of that Christmas night were soon known in one form or another to every dweller in that little town of Lyme-St.-Mary's, save and except only the dwellers under Joshua Serlcote's own roof. No two accounts agreed as to detail. Circumstances were added, pathetic, romantic, picturesque, with wonderful ingenuity, and all more or less betraying the almost universal sympathy with Julian. His father's will had driven him to consent to an uncongenial engagement; his father's penuriousness had driven him into debt; finally, his father's well-known pride and sternness had driven him to open rebellion. For weeks little else was talked of save Julian Serlcote and his strange disappearance. All that was good and amiable in him was recalled and dwelt upon

sadly. His geniality, his unfailing courtesy, his ready good-nature, his winning ways, all were heightened, exaggerated, until his character became invested with a halo that would certainly never have surrounded it had he remained in his own place and gone on his own downward way by the same paths by which he had been descending so long. Those who had been among the first to prophesy his ruin were among the last to blame him now that ruin had come. He might be as one dead, but there was a feeling in the town of Lyme-St.-Mary's that he would never be as one forgotten.

CHAPTER XI.

MARTIN MAKES ANOTHER MISTAKE.

Love is eternal!
 Whatever dies, that lives. I feel and know
 It is too great a thing to die.

Philip Van Artevelde.

It is often a very perplexing thing to look back upon great sorrows. Sometimes the cause of the grief—the actual thing itself—seems to fade away while the sorrow that we spent or wasted upon it is with us still—a black heavy memory from which we turn with pain. In other instances it is the event that stands out in bold relief, while the feeling we had concerning it seems to have been transient and shallow in proportion. Few of us have any standard by which to measure our earthly griefs; or if we hold by the standard we are too much weighed down for measurement. Grief is “her own mistress,” and ours.

“And shall I take a thing so blind,
 Embrace her as my natural good,
 Or crush her with a vice of blood
 Upon the threshold of the mind?”

If such crushing were possible, sorrow for some of us would cease to be sorrow at all—not for many though. We are all of us, more or less, not only born to trouble, but provided with due capacity for trouble, which no amount of crushing will render less keen, less constantly alive. Yet no two of us are alike in our capacity for sorrow, or in our power for remembering sorrow; and no two sorrows touch us to the same result. Only one thing may be said of all alike. If when we walked through the midst of the burning fiery furnace One walked with us whose form was like to the Son of God, then we may know certainly that we not only “had no hurt, but that that fierce salting by fire was for our healing and blessing—yea, for our blessing, though we may seem at first to have hardly life left in us for receiving it. But let us still wait upon God, and patiently, if we would yet give Him thanks for the help of His countenance.

Imagine the passing of two years over that house in the Corn Market of Lyme-St.-Mary's—two slow, eventless, silent years that seemed as ten even to the elder members of the stricken family; strangely stricken they were, and the feeling came out in strange ways. Had bereavement by death come to them they would have

mourned as other people of this class mourned, not varying so much as an inch in the breath of a crape fold. But there was no established precedent for behavior in disgrace. They might not put the blinds down, nor provide themselves with three graduated suits of mourning, but a certain instinct forbade the usual spring and autumn display of carefully-chosen millinery. If a new gown or bonnet had to be selected now, the children were made to feel that there would be a kind of heartlessness or shamelessness in choosing to wear any color but brown or gray. This sense of a new subduedness, where all had been subdued before, might be very oppressive: but then they knew that they were oppressed—oppressed with a sense of open shame that seemed to resolve itself into something more and more tangible as the time went on. They could never hold up their heads as they had done before, therefore they made no effort to hold them up at all. Friends fell away slowly but surely, others grew bolder; even the customers took a new tone, and bore themselves more diffidently or more haughtily, according to the view they took of Joshua Serlcote's trouble, and the blame they imagined must attach to himself. The gloom rested everywhere, and deepened on every occasion. Julian's name was never mentioned: the silence grew longer, and was kept more strictly; but it did not fail to make itself felt more impressively. Joshua Serlcote's lost son was lost indeed, but not yet was he forgotten.

He was not forgotten—no, nor was he forgiven, though through these two long years the old man had hardly any abiding thought save thought of his absent son, yet never again had any burst of tenderness arrested the hardening of his grief.

Yes; daily had he grown harder and prouder in his sorrow. He had lived a long life, he had borne the burden and heat of the day bravely, but all through there had been the natural human looking-for of peace and rest and satisfaction in his old age. The details had been arranged, the touches of warmth and color laid beforehand. He had encouraged a certain latent cheerfulness about the future. It was not strange, now that the future would not bear looking into at all, that his disappointment and desolation should turn to bitterness within him.

The memory of Julian held no bitterness for any one save his father. Elizabeth's grief was simply grief; she had nothing to forgive, there had been little to strain her blind, strong affection. She had never understood all that had happened, she had refrained from trying to understand. Julian had erred, and his error had been so severely visited that no chance of turning to better things had been given him. He had sinned, but most certainly had he been sinned against. Elizabeth was sad, but there was one whose life was more saddened still, though perhaps she showed it even less openly. Agnes Dyne hardly understood herself in those days. Though Julian's name was never mentioned, though she had never heard one word from him nor concerning him, and therefore did not know whether he were living or dead, still her mental life had turned so ceaselessly toward him that her love had strengthened day by day. She knew that it was quite possible—nay, probable—that she would never see him again, that her life would go on growing drearier, less hopeful—yes, even less hopeful—than it was now; that all her

natural, womanly dreams would fade out unfulfilled; yet none of the sweetness in her turned to bitterness under the knowledge. She was one of the few who seem to learn life's hardest lesson—submission to the will of God—with an ease that is perplexing to those who have required stroke upon stroke, and find themselves still murmuring under the rod. The years of her life might be long and dark and lonely, but she knew that she might not spend that life in idle moaning. She had work enough to do now, she would always find work of some kind lying ready to her hand; and if while she worked with hand or head her heart kept on beating time in this slow, sorrowful way, it was surely for some sufficient reason.

Her external cheerfulness was delusive; especially was it delusive to him who watched her most closely. Not the minutest change passed over the face of Agnes when Martin Brooke was by that he did not notice; not the slightest variation came into her voice or accent without causing corresponding varying emotion in him.

Since the very first day of Julian's departure he had consciously set himself to be to Agnes as a brother. This he might be; it would be a satisfaction to himself; it might be some alleviation to her. It was not much he could do, at least it did not seem much to himself, but Agnes had come by slow degrees to be unceasingly grateful for those ceaseless little attentions of which Martin thought so lightly. She made not the smallest effort to hide her gratitude; nay, it was a pleasure to her to show how pleased she was.

Martin still kept that strong check upon himself which had been so necessary before; at first he would not allow himself to dream for a moment that it could be less necessary now. But thoughts come unallowed, and however strong the will may be to banish them, they are apt to leave feelings behind them over which the will has less control.

It was part of Martin's duty now to bring the letters from the box in the morning. For many months he had looked eagerly for Julian's handwriting, wishing and longing to see it there. Now when he detected his own thought it was as if he had detected himself in uttering a falsehood. He was relieved—beyond doubt he was relieved when day after day, week after week, the silence remained unbroken. He might hate himself for the feeling, but still it was there.

Life was getting more and more intense with him; every meal-time was an event, and every evening a strange sweet delirium. The power he had over his outward man was remarkable; he could control everything but his voice, and he exposed himself seldomer than ever to danger here.

The second winter after Julian's departure had passed not unhappily for him. He had grown more and more necessary to Agnes' comfort, and he could not but perceive it. He it was to whom she turned instinctively for the thousand and one little services to be rendered in daily life where the means are not limitless and servants few. He brought her books from the library; often she left the choice to him; they read them together, discussed them, and discovered strange similarities of taste and opinion. And now that the spring had come and the days were longer, Martin had remem-

bered her love for wild flowers; and three or four times a week he came in with both hands filled with fresh, sweet, graceful things that roused her to emotions nearly ecstatic. Martin was often more curt, more odd than usual on these occasions. He would blush, throw his flowers down carelessly, and then walk off as if he had been offended.

"Disagreeable boy he is," Mrs. Serlcote said on one occasion when Martin had walked away in the middle of Agnes' thanks and delight, banging the door after him as he went out.

"But he is so very, very good," Agnes said, as she stood flushed with pleasure by the table singling out long scented sprays of wood-ruff, turquois forget-me-nots, and sweet blue violets. It was a little grieving to Mrs. Serlcote to see her new crimson table-cover littered with trash, and it was altogether perplexing to see any grown-up person blushing with delight in it. Slowly it occurred to her perplexed brain that there might be deeper cause for the blushes.

"Surely you are not falling in love with Martin," she said, her cap-ribbons trembling with irritation at the thought.

Agnes' color went deeper still—this time with pure resentment. She hesitated as she generally did when touched to anything like anger; then slowly the feeling died away, and a pleasant smile broke over her face.

"No, I'm not falling in love with him now, Aunt Susan," she said, turning to the flowers again. "I have loved him ever since I have known him. If I had a brother of my own I don't think I could have cared more for him than I care for Martin."

That was all; no more was said; there was no need for more. Agnes' eyes had been opened ruthlessly, and it seemed to her that she would have given all that she had to give if she might have been blind again. Never once had it crossed her mind that anything was possible between Martin and herself save friendship—the deep quiet brotherly friendship that she had been so glad to receive, the warm grateful sisterly friendship that she had been so ready to give.

She knew now that nothing in her earthly life was so much to her as this was. Take Martin out of it, with all his flowers and his books, and his thoughtful little kindnesses, and what would be left?

She was grieved and saddened, and tried to soothe herself by deciding that there should be no change. But the decision was idle; change was inevitable, and it dated from that hour.

Of course Martin was quick to feel it, and it increased the tension of his life immeasurably. What had happened? What was the meaning of these new and nameless differences of tone, and word, and look, and manner? Meaning there must be. Agnes was too true, too unaffected to look one thing while feeling another. Her new want of ease in his presence was painful beyond description to him at first. Had she discovered the real state of his feelings? Was she annoyed at his presumption?

Then, discovering this change in herself, feeling too the pain it wrought in him, Agnes began to avoid his presence altogether whenever it was possible to do so; especially did she avoid at any time being alone with him. The hour or two before the supper had lately been the pleasantest hours of Martin's whole life. He had his own

place by a large table at the further end of the room, where he used to sit in an awkward attitude with his head resting on his hand and an open book on the table before him. Agnes, and sometimes Elizabeth, used to sit on the sofa opposite, sewing, knitting, talking, smiling. The contrast between the girls was interesting to Martin. Agnes' small dark head, her brilliant deep eyes, her refined clear-cut features, used to stand out in vivid relief against the painted gray panel behind her; while Elizabeth's colorless hair, her broad, flat, placid-looking face, and round, stooping figure, usually clad in gowns of the same color as the paint, made her seem almost like part of the furniture. Martin used to deal carefully with the pleasure of looking up from his book. If he looked up long enough he was sure to win an understanding smile, perhaps a remark, at times even a question concerning the open page before him, that drew him to her side and led to an interesting discussion that made poor Elizabeth wonder how it came to pass that these two were so "clever," and had so much to say about things of which she had never even heard.

But all this was over now. Agnes had decided that she would give the children their daily music lesson in the evenings. She would like it better during the spring and summer, she said, and then they could take long country walks in the afternoon. Every one thought it an odd whim, but no one save Martin came near the real truth in accounting for it. In the first week he still took his place at the long table with his book, but the sound of the piano, though it was far away in the drawing-room upstairs, disturbed him, and made his attempts at reading futile. Still he sat there pretending to read, no one noticing him enough to see whether he turned over the pages or not.

This sense of forlornness was intolerable now. Before Agnes came it had been a kind of passive suffering, unsuspected by others and unencouraged by himself. Now the suffering was most intensely active, and the intensity did but seem to deepen with its continuance.

But at last the hour came when he could sit there no longer. It was a cold and rather mild May evening; the twilight was falling with the gloom and dullness of a November afternoon. Martin could not see to read, he did not care to go out for a walk, he did not care to go anywhere, he said to himself, as he sauntered slowly out of the room.

There was a dark, dilapidated staircase at the back of the house leading to some upper rooms given up to rats and packing-cases. The door of one of them was open, and Martin went in. The silent empty gloom seemed to suit his mood, and there was space within to walk up and down. He could breathe more easily and think more easily there than in the narrow back parlor. But thought was not easy to him anywhere, nor pleasant.

A long time Martin walked there. He knew when Fanny and Ellen finished their lesson and went away. Agnes went on playing. He could hear the soft, quiet, touching strains quite distinctly. Martin was no musician, but he had an impression that he was listening to a hymn, or perhaps a prayer. It was not like praise or thanksgiving, but like pleading, supplicating, longing for rest.

Agnes herself did not know what she was playing; she was thinking intently, letting her fingers wander listlessly over the keys. It was a habit she had when she was troubled or perplexed.

She was glad to be alone just now. The day had been an unusually trying one; it was the eve of Julian's birthday, and there had been a new unspoken sadness in the house all through the week. No one had even alluded to it, and Martin in his preoccupation had not remembered it. Probably it would not have made much difference to him if he had. Lately, unknown to himself, there had been a strong tendency in him to ignore Julian's memory altogether. It was not his doing that Julian had blotted himself out of life. Why should he be wretched—or, more important still, why should any one else be wretched to the end of existence because of that long past wrong-doing, or because of him who had done it and passed out of sight with it? That such a thing should be either necessary or right was not to be conceded for a moment.

Agnes had thought but little of Martin during that long sad day. In the morning, just before awakening, she had had a brief vivid dream. It seemed to her that she was in a small cottage, with her mother, somewhere on the bleak Northumbrian coast. A wild storm was raging without, causing the doors and windows to rattle, sweeping over the lowly roof, moaning in the wide chimney. A kind of vague dread was upon her, which was aroused to something more definite by the entrance of a child, crying out, in great excitement, "Come, come quickly; your father is going out to sea in this terrible storm. In a second, as it seemed to her, she found herself out on the quay, flying along between lines of people who made way for her. She recognized many of them. All the friends she had known in her life seemed to be there. Still she flew on, a hurricane of wind and rain beating overhead, the deepening roar of the waves in her ear. The sea was lashing itself into huge gray mountains, crested with white; the spray fell in heavy showers. Suddenly she stopped. The people with one movement fell backward from the edge of the quay, disclosing to her view a small steamboat which she knew quite well. She had seen it almost daily for many years in her childhood; its quaint Saxon name, the ancient name of the town, was there on its stern in large gilt letters. This part of her dream was vivid beyond description. There was only one figure on the wave-swept deck of the vessel, and this one was her father. He stood there by the helm, seeming strange in the strange new nobility that had passed upon him. His face was turned toward her, calm and dignified. Perfectly still he stood, waving no farewells to the crowd. The boat was just beginning to turn her head to the open sea as Agnes rushed forward, her arms outstretched, her voice raised aloud in a cry of agony.

"Oh, father, father, wherever you are going, take me with you!"

But her father raised his hand in interdiction.

"No," he said, solemnly, "you can not come. You have work to do, and Julian Serlcote will wish to see you to-day."

Even as he uttered the words her feeling of distress seemed to resolve itself into one of pride in him who spoke them. She was conscious of a certain satisfaction that so many were there to see

him as he was now, with every trace of care and anxiety and worldliness gone from his face, and in their stead a stamp of majesty and consecration that seemed to elevate her own soul even as she looked upon him. Was this her father? Was she the daughter of one so great?

She awoke with these questions, so to speak, on her lips, and feeling as if some new thing had come into her life. It was only a dream, but for that day it was more powerful to influence her inner self than were the realities of her waking life. A strange quietness was upon her, notwithstanding the sense of coming change. She felt that if Julian were to return suddenly she could receive him without much perturbation. Indeed, he seemed to be so near her that the feeling at times rose to expectation. Yet it did not disturb her; it seemed as if, remembering the look, the voice, the manner of him who had spoken to her from the deck of the boat, she could not easily be disturbed by any mere worldly event.

She believed very certainly now that Julian was living, and she did not doubt that he was needing her, or at any rate thinking of her.

Toward evening this consciousness grew stronger. She knew that she had given the children their music lesson in a very mechanical way; her thoughts had been absent all the while. Was Julian ill? Was he perishing with hunger while his father's servants had bread enough and to spare? What was his need, his danger, his sorrow? It seemed all but too much for endurance that she whose heart was almost weighed down with its burden of broken affection, who would have walked the length and breadth of the land to hold his hand in hers but for an hour, might not even know whether ten miles or ten thousand stretched between them. There was only one thing she could know with any certainty, let him be where he might, he could not be where God's mercy and loving-kindness could not reach him. Therefore, though she might not afford him lower and more human help, she might help him by her prayers to an extent that she could neither imagine nor limit. "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams." This she knew and this she believed, and she acted upon that belief.

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The piano had been silent some time when Martin Brooke came down from the garret-room where he had been wondering and thinking. He went very softly to the drawing-room. Agnes was standing near the fire, with the full warm glow of its light upon her. There was no other light in the room; the curtains were not drawn; the rain was beating upon the window panes; the wind was rising and moaning almost as wildly as it had moaned in her dream.

She looked up with a smile, but Martin saw that it was an absent one as he came tremblingly forward. He had tried to prepare himself, at any rate, to decide what he should say first; but his presence of mind forsook him before he spoke.

His tremulousness was quite perceptible. Agnes could see the warm color rising in his face, the intense earnest look that was coming into his eyes; and her own consciousness began to come back to her as she noted these things. Martin was holding out a

book, a new copy of George Herbert's poems bound in dark green leather.

"Will you accept this?" he said, in a kind of whisper, beginning with what he had meant to be the very end of the scene. Then he looked up hopelessly.

Somehow Agnes felt his helplessness, and felt too the cause of it. She took the book hesitatingly, yet gently and pityingly.

"How beautiful it is!" she said. "But why should you give it to me? Keep it—I would rather you should keep it, and lend it to me when I want it, which will be very often."

"No," said Martin, declining to take it; and beginning to recover himself a little. "No; I bought it for you some time ago; but I never dared to give it to you till to-night."

Then he stopped again; he had more to say, and words were not wanting; but something else was wanting. He had never felt so strengthless, so self-deserted. It would be no wonder if Agnes should despise him and his plea altogether.

The idea was stimulating; almost without an effort, as it seemed to himself, he rose above that pitiable mood that had been upon him. A touch that had the force of electricity seemed to pass through him and from him. Agnes knew all that was coming; she might not avert it; she could only strengthen herself to meet it.

The book was still in her hand; Martin came a little nearer. Agnes perceiving with a certain unwilling consciousness that he was no longer the every-day commonplace young man whose coming and going had never raised her pulse for the hundredth part of a second since she had known him. Now her heart was beating till she could hardly control it. The change was not unnoted.

"I couldn't have come to you to-night but for something that occurred to me just now," he said, beginning in clearer and quieter tones than he had used before. "I have been unhappy—very unhappy—but it has occurred to me that you were keeping out of my way—because—because you had discovered that—it was better to do so. I did not know—I can only hope that you feared you might be beginning to care for me, and didn't want to unless you knew that I cared for you; and—"

"Oh, no, Martin; no!" she said, interrupting him in pleading tones: "that is not it. It is all a mistake! Oh, I am so sorry!"

"Don't say it is a mistake!" Martin broke in, impetuously, the rising pain within him making itself felt in his voice and manner. "Don't say that! I don't think you know quite. You have never thought of it. You don't know how I have loved you!—yes, even when I had no right to love you! I didn't acknowledge it to myself. I didn't dare to think of you with any hope even when I might have done so. Ever since you came you have been all the satisfaction I have had in life. To think of you, to care for you, to long every day and all day long to make you happy has been all I have lived for so far as this world was concerned."

Agnes had interrupted him before, and he had taken no notice of the interruption. Now she raised her hand with a beseeching gesture, and looked at him with an expression more beseeching still. Martin hardly knew it, but hope died within him before any word was said.

"Martin, I know all that you have done," she said, speaking gently and sadly, but altogether kindly; "I know and remember things that you have forgotten. You have never even guessed the comfort that you have been to me—that you are still, and I hope will continue to be. Don't let this make any change; I have sorrow enough."

Martin stood quietly for a few moments. The shock was upon him still, and it was heavier than he was able to realize.

But he did not bear it badly. After the first ten minutes or so he ceased to feel stunned, and began to recognize his disappointment as a fact to which he would have to reconcile himself. He was just a shade astonished at his own capacity for being philosophical at such a moment.

His first thought had been of himself, this must be sadly acknowledged; his next thought was of Agnes, of the sorrow to which she had alluded.

"You are still grieving for *him*?" Martin asked, in some surprise.

"*Still!*" You speak as if twenty years had passed! If it were twice twenty, and he had not returned, I should be grieving!"

Martin's astonishment grew stronger, still, and a little shame stole into his heart for the deliberate way in which he had tried to persuade himself that Julian was forgotten. Agnes' vivid remembrance, her keen, strong affection, was as visible in her manner as in her words. Martin had had no idea that he was touching chords so ready to vibrate under his hand. He was tender-hearted, and his pity for her was well-nigh as strong as his own disappointment.

"Do you think that Julian will come back here?" he asked, sadly. The expectation seemed such a vain one to him.

"Yes, I do," Agnes said. "But I know that I have no grounds for thinking so, at least none that would seem valid to any one else."

Then there was another silence. A gleam of distant hope crossed Martin's brain. He could not let it go.

"If you should be mistaken, if things should go on as they have done, couldn't you—couldn't you ever care for me?"

Martin spoke very calmly. Agnes was not disturbed or annoyed by his pertinacity.

She looked at him when she replied as quietly as he was looking at her.

"If Julian should never come back," she said, "and if I knew quite certainly that he never would, and if I should set myself to try to care for you as I have cared for him, you would have cause to repent most bitterly the day you ever saw me. I should probably succeed up to a certain point, the point of deceiving you and myself also, and then would come the time for being undeceived, and life for me would be one miserable lie; for you one long miserable effort to believe it. Love is love for some people, let others change as they will. I may never see him again in this world, but that can make no difference. He is as near to me as if I saw him every day, and so he will remain."

She had spoken in firmer, more decided tones than she had meant to use. Martin looked up, and Agnes thought that he seemed reproachful, but it was self-reproach that was moving him. How

blind he had been! How untrue to himself, perhaps to Julian also! He had thought the thing he wished to think, and now he had to repent of his self-seeking.

"Don't misunderstand me," Agnes said, speaking more soothingly, "and don't think that I am not sorry. Perhaps I have been to blame, but I did not dream of this. Let us forget it; let us be just the same to each other as we were before."

Martin listened to the words as if he had hardly heard them; but later they came back upon him forcibly. It seemed strange to him that that evening could be almost as if it had never been, that he could go on calmly reconciling himself to the sense of loss, yet daily, hourly, feeling more and more the worth, the goodness, the spiritual beauty of the woman he had lost, or rather failed to win.

Once or twice a kind of paroxysm came over him, rending his very heart with agonizing longings and regrets. But not by so much as a shadow upon his face did he betray to any human being the testing he had gone through so bravely. It was thus that he suffered, not continuously, not even frequently, but during a few supreme hours that wrought deep effects upon his life.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PRODIGAL IS SEEN A LONG WAY OFF.

Good love, howe'er ill placed,
Is better for a man's soul in the end
Than if he loved ill what deserves love well.

MRS. BROWNING: *Aurora Leigh*.

WHEN the end of the summer came Martin Brooke startled his uncle one day by asking for a holiday. Joshua Serlcote had never had any holidays himself; he had never dreamed of such a thing. Pleasure-seeking was for the rich, the idle. Nevertheless, Martin was allowed to set out with his friends on a three weeks' walking tour through the English Lake district.

The extra work that devolved upon Mr. Serlcote made him a little fretful at times, a little uncertain in temper. When Martin had been gone about a week everybody began to wish he would come back again; things were not going on smoothly; there was a sense of perpetual strain and frequent jar.

"Go and tell your father *again* that breakfast is ready," Mrs. Serlcote said snappishly to Nellie one morning. Presently Nellie came back, looking sad, and afraid to give the message she had to give.

"Father says he doesn't want any breakfast," the child said, timidly.

Even Mrs. Serlcote looked up in surprise. Her husband was not given to caprices of this kind.

"Well, I suppose he knows best," she said, in subdued tones, but she did not appear to be concerned. Doubtless Joshua's temper had been ruffled again, which was no new thing, though he was taking a new way of showing it.

Agnes did not say anything, she felt disposed to an unusual

silence; but after breakfast she opened the glass door gently and went into the shop.

Her uncle was there, sitting behind the little railing that screened the desk. Agnes saw at once, from his attitude, that it was not temper that was upon him. He was ill or in trouble. A single glance at his face confirmed her in this opinion.

"What is it, uncle?" she said, gently; "are you not well?"

Joshua Serlcote did not answer, but he pushed toward her the pile of letters which had come by that morning's post. The top letter was addressed to Martin Brooke in Julian's handwriting—not the clear, firm, beautiful writing upon which he had prided himself so much; this was crooked, tremulous, barely legible; still it was Julian's.

"You will open it, uncle?" she said, almost breathlessly, but speaking as if there could be no doubt as to the answer. But Joshua Serlcote replied decisively, emphatically:

"I shall certainly *not* open it."

Agnes' heart was beating slowly, heavily; her hands were turning cold; she was beginning to feel faint.

No one else was present; Ben Chadwick had gone to his breakfast. Agnes turned away, and sat down on one of the high chairs to recover herself.

Presently she spoke again.

"You remember that we have not Martin's address?" she asked; "and that he will not be home for another fortnight?"

"Yes, I remember," her uncle said, speaking in the same hard tone as before.

"And you have noted that handwriting?"

"Certainly I have noted it."

Then Agnes came back to her uncle's side, and laid one hand gently on his shoulder.

"Julian is ill," she said; "I feel certain of that. He may be dying. If you will not open this letter yourself you will let me open it?"

Joshua Serlcote rose from his seat, and with trembling hands placed the letter inside his desk.

"It is addressed to Martin Brooke," he said, his lips quivering painfully as he spoke; "and Martin Brooke shall receive it as it came."

Then he turned away, suffering too much himself to be fully alive to the suffering he was inflicting.

Agnes' first step was to send an urgent telegram to the inn at Windermere from which Martin's one letter had been dated; her next to write to the innkeeper. Then she set out in search of the friends of Martin's friends, hoping that they might know more of the plans of the tourists than she knew, but in this she was disappointed.

It was good for her to be doing something. She was almost sorry when she could find nothing more to do. Never before in her whole life had patience been so difficult.

The remainder of the week passed on. Joshua Serlcote kept silence, and kept it in that hard, proud, impassive manner of his which seemed to defy any one to break it.

No news of Martin came. Agnes watched every post, listening breathlessly to every knock, starting at the sound of every opening door. She was growing paler and thinner under the strain, and her uncle saw that she was, but no sign of relenting came from him.

Eight days had passed when Martin suddenly walked in, pale and earnest-looking. It was early in the morning, and he had been traveling all night, having only received Agnes' telegram on the previous day.

He had no thought of himself—of rest or of refreshment. He asked his uncle quietly for the letter, and then went to his room to read it. Agnes was waiting for him by the drawing-room door when he came down. She had dismissed the children for a while.

They went into the room, and Martin gave her the letter at once, judging wisely that this would be the best thing to do. The contents were distressing, but it seemed to him that even distress would be better than that sad, wistful patience that had been hers so long.

As Agnes had feared, Julian was ill, dying, he believed himself to be, and in utter pennilessness.

The letter was brief, and written with great effort, but a spirit not Julian's seemed to breathe through every line.

He said nothing of his humility, little of his patience, and less of his faith, but it was evident that he was no stranger to these things, and also that he had become acquainted with them through a sterner and more sorrowful teaching than any they had feared.

He had two objects in writing, he said; one was to ask for money sufficient to discharge a small debt owing to his landlady, and to provide him with necessaries during the short time he had to live; the other was to beg his father's forgiveness.

"I would have written to my father myself," he said, "but I feared that he would not read a letter in my handwriting. Will you read as much of this to him as you think fit, and try to plead for me? If he will not help me, at least beg him to forgive me. I have prayed night and day that he might be led to do it—prayed till I have been almost as sure of it as I am of a higher forgiveness."

There was more than this. Agnes could hardly see her own name through the tears that were blinding her eyes, but she strove to read on.

"I need not ask for Agnes' forgiveness," he continued. "But tell her, tell her this, with such love as was never mine before, that it has been the thought of her, of her goodness, of her faith, that has saved me from depths of ruin and despair that I can not now think of without horror. I can say no more, but it seems to me as if not one entreaty, not one prayer, not so much as an appealing look of hers, had ever fallen to the ground."

Agnes was silent for a few moments after she had read the letter. Then she said:

"Which of us shall go to Uncle Joshua?"

"Don't you think it would be better for me to go?" Martin said. "I have no hope of succeeding, but Julian has asked me, and it would prepare the way for you."

"You will go at once?"

"Yes, immediately. Will you wait till I come back?"

Agnes had not long to wait. She tried to pray, to ignore the

tumult of sorrow that was in her own soul, to shut out the hope that pleaded so earnestly for entrance. It seemed to her that she had not had time enough for all these things when she heard a step on the stair. She heard with some surprise that it was not Martin's step but her uncle's.

The old man entered the room in a stately fashion that boded ill. It seemed to Agnes that not for years had she seen his gray head so erect, his thin, firm mouth so mercilessly closed. He was pale, but it was the pallor of strong determination.

"I have come here at the request of Mr. Martin Brooke," he began, in a hard, thin voice that broke tremulously even in the middle of this first sentence. "But I have come to say what I have been saying to him—what I have been preparing to say ever since I saw the outside of that letter."

Then he stopped from sheer incapacity to proceed. His age had told upon his strength; his sorrow had told upon it more. His stoical pride was making serious demands upon his physical weakness.

"Have you read the letter, uncle?" she asked.

"No; I have not read it. I have determined that I would not read it—that I would not listen to it—and I will keep my determination. I knew perfectly well what it would contain; there would be a plea of ill-health, a request for money, a few idle words about forgiveness. Martin informs me that every conjecture is right, therefore there is nothing to disturb the resolution I have made. Years ago I cast off my son, and I cast him off forever. The suffering that it cost me to do so I have endured. If it should be possible for me ever to forget that suffering, then—but not till then—will it be possible for me to forgive him who was the cause of it."

"But, Uncle Joshua, I too know something of forgiveness. If you could forgive, it would be easy to forget—nay, it would be difficult and painful to remember!"

Joshua Serlcote made no reply; he had settled himself in an attitude of patient waiting, placing his elbow on the mantel-piece and leaning his head on his hand. Agnes would plead; he would listen to her, and while listening he would remember.

"You say that you have cast Julian off, that he is no longer your son," Agnes went on, subduing the eagerness within her with all the strength she had to spare. "Supposing that could be—supposing that he had never been your son, but simply a man who had sinned against you, and repented of his sin—do you not think that he is entitled to your forgiveness?"

Her uncle made no answer; he stood there, not looking at his niece, but beyond her, out of the windows. Those compressed lips of his did not look as if they were likely to betray him.

"But putting aside all thought of Julian," the girl resumed, in bolder and more resolute tones, "think of yourself—of the risk, the danger of delay! 'When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.'"

Still there was no change in the old man's look or attitude. What Christian spirit there was alive in him acknowledged the righteous-

ness of her plea, but the sense of his own suffering was keener at that moment than his sense of Christian duty.

Agnes was bewildered by his resistance; she had never known of that last wild deed of Julian's—the midnight robbery of his father's shop. She did not know that in Joshua Serlcote's mind all his son's other faults had been dwarfed into insignificance by that most disastrous act.

The old man was aware of her ignorance, but not even now would he excuse his own hardness by disclosing to her the depths to which Julian had descended.

What could she do or say more? Her own great love was almost overpowered by her great tender pity. Was it possible that Julian's father was feeling no pity, no tenderness at all?—that he was capable of none?

“Think of him, Uncle Joshua—think of him!” she exclaimed, more passionately than before. “He is alone, penniless, dying, and pleads that he may not die unforgiven. Is it possible that you can refuse to forgive him? Think of that other father—the father of the prodigal son in the Bible! When the prodigal was yet a great way off his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.”

Joshua Serlcote's lip quivered, his whole frame seemed to quiver; still he uttered no word.

Presently Agnes came near to him, and took his chill hands in hers. The look that she met was almost startling.

There must be something more than she knew of—some unfathomed depths in the old man's heart. He was looking into her face pleadingly, reproachfully, and a strange resemblance to her mother struck her, almost for the first time. She seemed to understand him better—or rather to become aware that there were things that she might not understand. Yet she could not ask. A moment longer she watched that strange new look, then she spoke again more gently.

“Oh, uncle,” she said, “you will forgive him! I know you will forgive him! You are longing to do so! Don't let any thought of anything prevent you. Think only of that Good Shepherd who goes out into the wilderness to *seek* His straying sheep; and when He has found a wanderer, *takes it on His shoulders and carries it home rejoicing.*”

Even while she spoke Joshua Serlcote's eyes were slowly filling with tears. He sunk into the nearest chair, covered his face with his hands, and sobbed as he had never before sobbed within his own remembrance.

He wished to be alone, but he had no power to move away.

“Leave me, leave me!” he cried, in his distress, and Agnes went out—went to her own room to pray for him, and not for him only.

CHAPTER XIII.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

To expect what never comes, to lie in bed and not sleep, to serve well and not be advanced, are three things to die of.—*Italian Proverb.*

MARTIN BROOKE was a little astonished by the question his uncle put to him on the evening of the day of his return.

It had been a silent day, Martin could not see his way with any clearness. Something must be done, and done at once, and it appeared that he must act upon his own responsibility. Acting thus it was not much he could do. In that most important matter of all, obtaining the old man's forgiveness, he had proved himself entirely powerless. He was disheartened. All else that remained to be done seemed so trivial in comparison.

The shop had been closed some time, but Martin remained there in the semi-darkness, brooding over his difficult position. He raised his head when his uncle came in, but he looked up very absently, hoping nothing, expecting nothing, unless it were some querulous remark upon his being there.

For a minute or two Joshua Serlcote stood silent, and Martin saw that the expression of his face was changed. If possible it was a sadder face to look upon than before. Much of the determination, the hardness, had gone from it. The fight, the long fierce fight was over. He had not yielded, he had been beaten. Even yet the pressure from within, the pressure of his stifled love and yearning for his son, seemed as little in sympathy with himself as did that pressure that had been brought to bear upon him from without.

Yet he had suffered, and the grace of suffering was in his words, as well as in his tone and look.

"What is it you wish to do, Martin?"

The question was vague, but so uttered that Martin quite understood it.

"I should like to go up to London by the first train in the morning."

"Very well. I suppose your holiday is not over yet, you can spend your time as you choose."

There was another pause. The next question was a difficult one, but Martin did not plunge into the difficulty. He took breath, stroked the feathered end of his quill pen backward with careless fingers, then he said,

"If Julian is able to travel I suppose it will be better to bring him back with me?"

For a second that seemed ten the eyes of the two met. Joshua Serlcote's were the first to drop.

"Don't try me too far, Martin," he said, tremulously. "I don't know what I can bear yet. But perhaps—perhaps I can bear anything that you may choose to do."

Then he turned away, leaving Martin behind with a new heart of hope and thankfulness in him. Martin did not stay there long.

He had to share his hope, to impart a touch of new life to another heart.

Agnes Dyne and Martin Brooke were both young, and one was buoyant. In spite of all past sorrow and present room for sorrow, Agnes could no longer deny entrance to the hopefulness that came. Julian might be ill, very ill, but what could not care and kindness do? The power of these things was limited, it was true; but there was a power to heal and bless that knew no limit. "With God nothing is impossible," she said to herself. And was not God to be reached by prayer? Was not His aid to be won by faith?

Martin had to be at the station by five o'clock the next morning, and he was surprised that his uncle should be stirring so early. Agnes was down, making tea; moving quietly about, smiling now and then that sweet bright smile that Martin loved so much to see. Joshua saw it too, but it seemed to make him sadder. Whatever the result of Martin's errand, there could be no more joyfulness or hopefulness for him on this side of the grave. He could not live his life again; he could not slowly day by day build up new living hope, or try to revive the dead ones. There remained nothing for him save sad regret for the things that had been; regrets sadder still for the things that were not and could now never be.

He was very restless as the time of Martin's departure drew near; he could not even sit still, but went in and out of the room, looking strangely gray and wan and nervous. At the last moment he put some thin paper, tightly folded, into Martin's hand, and Martin knew that it was money. His first impulse was to refuse it; having already provided himself with what he considered would be enough for his cousin's need and his own. His second and better thought, however, came quickly. "I am to take this to Julian from you?" he said. It was easy to say anything in the excitement of the moment, yet he paused a moment before he added, "Shall I take any message?"

There was a brief struggle in Joshua Serlcote's soul, then he lifted up his face and spoke fervidly as a man speaks on his death-bed.

"Tell him—tell him that I pray for grace to forgive him."

That was all. He responded to the warm grasp of Martin's hand; and then he turned away out of sight. The emotions within him were too conflicting to permit him to seek the sympathy he stood so sorely in need of.

The day went by slowly; even Mrs. Serlcote was gentle and subdued, and shed her tears of mingled hope and joy in secret. Julian's return was by no means the same thing to her that it was to her husband. She had nothing to forget, nothing to forgive. There was no room in her mind for more than one idea at a time; and the idea present now was that Julian was coming back. She made no parade of her preparations; but she was happier than any one else in the house because she had so much to prepare.

Martin had promised to write as soon as possible; "probably that same evening," he had said as he went out; and it was not until the morning came, and there was no letter, that Joshua Serlcote and his household knew how intensely for four and-twenty hours they had been living on that hasty promise of Martin's.

Nothing was said at breakfast-time, but afterward Agnes and Elizabeth tried to comfort each other. Perhaps Martin had thought that it was not worth while to write; they might be on their way home even now, or Martin might have been careless about posting his letter in time. Neither of the hypotheses was very tenable, as the girls knew but too well; yet there was comfort in trying to maintain them—in ignoring those nine long days that had elapsed between the receipt of Julian's letter and Martin's departure, and all that might have happened in that time.

But when another morning came and there was still no news, words of comfort came less readily, and with less assurance. Not one member of that household acknowledged to another the full agony of the suspense in which they were held. Mrs. Serlcote blamed Martin with all the eloquence that she was possessed of. Let the circumstances be what they might, he ought to have written, she said; hardly any news could be worse than this torturing delay. But no one agreed with her on this latter point. The delay was painful, but hope still lingered behind the pain.

On the third morning the letters had been delivered a little earlier than usual. When Agnes came down-stairs her uncle was standing by the open door, leaning there to catch the cool morning breeze. He looked faint, and there was an unopened letter in his hand, which he held out to his niece. It was in Martin's handwriting, and it was not bordered with black.

"Read it—read it to yourself," he said, hurriedly, "and tell me what it contains. I know the news is bad."

Yes, the news was bad. Agnes read on, her face growing paler, the letter in her hand trembling more visibly, her uncle watching her keenly, but patiently.

She looked up at last.

"Martin can not find Julian," she said, slowly.

"Can not find him?"

"No; he left the lodging he had been in five days before Martin arrived there. The landlady thinks he left because he did not wish to run more deeply into her debt."

"And did he not say where he was going?"

"He did not know."

"Is that all?"

"No; but will you not read the letter?"

Joshua took it in his hand again, but he could not see the words. There was a mist before his eyes, and a gathering sense of darkness.

"Tell me—tell me the rest," he said, faintly.

"There is not much to tell. Martin is doing all that may be done; advertising, making inquiries everywhere, and by every means."

"Doesn't he say a word of—of Julian's health?" asked the old man, with great effort. It was the first time that his son's name had passed his lips for nearly three years.

Agnes hesitated. She was quite calm now.

"He only repeats what the landlady said. She thought that the young man could not live many days."

It was only another shock—trouble falling where trouble had been before. It vibrated through the house for a few days, thrill-

ing afresh with every letter that came from Martin, dying down to a dull, hopeless sadness after reading the details of his fruitless search.

For three weeks Martin remained in London—weeks of daily-increasing desperation. When he wrote, he wrote the naked truth; he compelled himself to do this; but all the while he went on hoping against hope, fighting against the despair that beset him with every fresh disappointment.

Then he came back; and even in the first sickening moment of confirmed hopelessness, he drew some of the anxiety of the household upon himself. He was merely a shadow of the Martin Brooke that went out; he was paler, and thinner, and older-looking by years. He had failed so far as his object went, but he had not failed in doing his duty.

CHAPTER XIV.

RELENTING.

Alas! long suffering and most patient God,
Thou need'st be surelier God to bear with us
Than even to have made us.

MRS. BROWNING: *Aurora Leigh*.

WE have most of us proved for ourselves this truth of Shakespeare's—

“When sorrows come they come not single spies,
But in battalions.”

We may perhaps fight manfully for awhile, a longer or shorter while according to our strength, but there comes a day when courage fails, when a terrible dread undermines our faith. Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Will He be no more entreated? Is His mercy clean gone forever?

These crises do not, thank God! come into all lives, but some there are who have to live through the fire of such hours again and again, amazed, stricken, uncomprehending. Hope seems *torn* from them. Time after time they rise up bravely, yet humbly, tremulously, but only to be cast down lower than before. Even the promises of God's Word seem to lose their meaning—the very promises whereby we had lived and moved in peace and trust for half a life-time.

And look, “Whatsoever he doeth it shall prosper,” saith the Psalmist. And look, whatsoever we do, there is no prosperity at all, say we. Our every leaf hangs withered on the bough. We are as trees planted in a barren and dry land where no water is.

In time of great and continued trial such moods may come upon us unawares; but they can not stay with us unawares; they can not stay with us without sin.

This is deliverance if we will seek it; strength to seek may be had for the asking. There is no condition attached. “Ask, and it shall be given you.”

If it were possible to know now the things that we shall know hereafter, then trial would cease to try us—to test us. The troubles of this life would seem such motes in the eternal light of

the life to come that we should probably watch the course of them with the interest of children watching motes in the sunbeams of a summer's day.

But "we know not now." Herein lies the power, the grand, training, strengthening, perfecting power of suffering.

We might certainly know much more than we do know if we were not so impatient in acquiring the knowledge that can only come through much tribulation.

Still, knowledge must be limited; faith, belief, lies under the restraint.

Even when faith is most difficult we can rest assured that the God, without whose prescience not a sparrow falls to the ground, does not permit our smallest trouble to fall upon us without His deliberate intention.

"Behold, *happy* is the man whom God correcteth."

Let another who has written of the mystery of suffering say a few striking words here.

"You see one to-day loving God and toiling for him with diligence and fervor, but with strange inconsistencies in character of which he is all unconscious. Pride still rules the will, although it feeds itself with the things of God. You see him not again, it may be for years, but when you meet once more you are struck with his humility, his self-restraint, and his beautiful tenderness. You seek to know the secret of this change, and he tells you that it was in the school of affliction that his character was formed."

Not a wicked man to begin with, mark you, and not tried by some brief ordeal, but trained perfectly *in the school* of affliction.

"Therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty."

"For He maketh sore, and bindeth up: He woundeth, and His hands make whole.

"He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee."

"He from the stone will wring celestial dew,
If but the prisoner's heart be faithful found, and true."

No evil, but only good—good that yourself shall yet acknowledge. Take courage! Hold thee still in the Lord, and abide patiently upon Him.

* * * * * *

Agnes Dyne strove through those dark long days not impatiently. A new trouble had fallen upon her—upon all of them. Joshua Serlcote was ill, not able to leave his room—very often not able to rise from his bed for days together. Dr. Sargent was puzzled, and this was not to be wondered at. He had some suspicion that he was expected to "minister to a mind diseased"—nay, more than a suspicion, for the old man's mind wandered at times, and betrayed the nature and cause of its disease.

"It was those eight last days that did it," he said, one evening, waking up out of a troubled sleep. He was lying on the sofa by the fire. Agnes and Elizabeth were in the room, and the doctor was seated near his patient, watching the complicated symptoms that made his diagnosis such a difficult matter. To an unpracticed

eye it might have seemed that Joshua Serlcote had never looked better in his whole life than he did that evening. There was a glow of feverish color on his face; his gray eye, that had looked so dull and leaden, was bright and blue; his white hair shone in the lamp-light like silver thread; he made quite a picture lying there, with his head on a soft crimson cushion.

"Eight whole days," he went on, wanderingly. "Much may happen in that time. It was my doing—I did it. I would not let Agnes open the letter. If I had given her some money to send to him he would have stayed in the lodging, and Martin would have found him there and brought him back. I wanted to do it; all the while I wanted to do it, but I couldn't, I couldn't. I don't know why, I don't know why! I wanted him, I wanted my boy, my Absalom! Oh, Absalom! my son, my son! would to God I had died for thee!"

Then he seemed to rouse himself for a little while—to recognize those about him. He talked quite coherently, making no more mention of his son. The old habit of silence on the point nearest to his heart was strong upon him still in his conscious moments. But these conscious moments did not last long on such an evening as this. Relapse came; he went on betraying himself, causing others to betray themselves, until Dr. Sargent went homeward, thinking as he went that in all his professional experience he had never known anything more inexplicable than this continued grief for such a scapegrace as Julian Serlcote had been.

As the autumn deepened into winter, contrary to any one's expectation, Joshua Serlcote began to recover, and went on recovering up to a certain point. There he stopped, a broken-down, worn-out old man with one idea.

It was not, as people hinted, softening of the brain that he suffered from, but softening of the heart that had been overhardened.

He tried to attend to business matters as usual, but it was well for him and for his wife and children that he had Martin Brooke at his right hand. More and more he grew to rely upon Martin. His pride and his reserve had deserted him altogether. Care and attention, and even tenderness, were accepted by him gratefully now, and there was no lack of these things. Sorrow had wrought strange changes in that hard, narrow household in the Corn Market.

Still it was a sad household. The shadow of the great grief that had rested upon it was slow to pass away. The end of it—if end it had proved—had been so dark and bewildering. Even that strong, almost deathless hope of Agnes' had been crushed. There were times when it seemed to her that it would have been rest and comfort to have seen Julian die, or even to have known certainly that he had been seen to die. But she spoke to no one of her own grief. When she spoke of Julian at all it was to comfort his father.

Latterly Joshua Serlcote had fallen into a habit into which people who have much care and sorrow often fall, a habit of talking to himself as he went about the house. He had only one topic—that lost son of his whom he might have found if he would.

That was all his misery now. His prodigal son had returned, in heart, if not in person. "And I didn't go out to meet him," the old man would murmur, shaking his head; "no, I didn't run to

meet him. I forbade him to come near; I barred my door, and he fell down and died, and I never cared.

"No, no, not that; what am I saying? I did care; I cared with all my soul; but I was mad; I know I was mad; I didn't know what I was doing."

One day Agnes overheard him. She had caught her own name. "Agnes said the Good Shepherd laid His sheep on His shoulder," her uncle was saying, mournfully. She went to his side, and put her hand within his arm soothingly.

"Doesn't that comfort you, Uncle Joshua?" she asked.

"Comfort me! No; how can it comfort me? What did *I* do?"

"I was not thinking of what you did; I was thinking of what the Good Shepherd did for our wanderer, how He sought him and found him, and—if He took him home, how tenderly He took him. Sometimes it comforts me when I can find no other comfort."

"*If* He took him home! Why do you say 'if'?"

"Because I am not sure that Julian is dead," the girl replied, with an emphasis that betrayed to herself the existence of a feeling she had hardly dared to suspect herself of entertaining.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE SNOW.

Might I not tell
Of difference, reconciliation, pledges given,
And vows, where there was never need of vows,
And kisses, where the heart on one wild leap
Hung tranced from all pulsation.

TENNYSON.

CHRISTMAS-TIDE that year was a clear still time. A light snow had fallen a day or two before, and had been followed by a frost; the air was calm—almost mild in its utter calmness.

The night of Christmas Eve was a night of unusual beauty. The dark indigo sky was studded with brightly burning stars. The snow-covered roofs of the houses of Lyme-St.-Mary's stood out in clear relief. The silence was only broken by the bells at midnight. They rang out as usual, having a message for whosoever would listen—a message of peace and joy and holy mirth.

The moon rose late, heightening the beauty and holiness of the night or rather of the morning. Her first rays fell slowly athwart the white roofs, came slanting down into the deserted streets. They were not quite deserted; one tall slight figure was wandering there. He had been wandering all night in the shadow of the houses; moving slowly from street to street, stopping to rest, moving on again, and again resting.

Was he wandering aimlessly? or did he need strength of mind or body to carry out his aim? He seemed to avoid one street, the Corn Market. More than once he turned away after he had entered it.

The morning wore on, calmly, silently, gloriously. The moon shone out more brightly, silvering the church tower, the rime-laden trees, the quaint chimney stacks. The tall slowly moving figure

still sought what shade there was to be found, but he began to rest more frequently and for longer spaces of time.

Suddenly he seemed to make a great effort. He rose to his feet, stood awhile, covering his face with his hands; then he went on, evidently with more of resoluteness than of strength to support him.

He was not the only man in Lyme-St.-Mary's who was watching the dawn of that Christmas Day. The sweet holiness of the night had been mingled with bitter memories for Joshua Serlcote; too bitter to permit him to sleep. It seemed to him that if he could have gone back a year of his life—but one year, he might have been happier. The sin of unforgiveness had been on his soul even then, but he had not been hardened and harrowed with the knowledge of the consequence of his sin.

He had risen early. The house was chill and dim; he went about with his candle in his hand, but he could find no place inviting enough to induce him to sit down. The empty grates were white with ashes; the dreary ghost of the day before lingered everywhere.

Presently he went out to the narrow high-walled garden at the back of the house. The moon was disappearing; one by one the stars were fading out of the sky, somewhere beyond the horizon of Lyme-St. Mary's the dawn might be appearing. There was a strange mingling of lights and shadows. The ivy that hung from the wall was covered with hoar-frost; the lightly-lying snow looked soft and pure. No sound fell through the silence.

There was something strangely impressive about that Christmas morning. Joshua Serlcote walked up and down the path nearest to the outer wall, feeling wrought upon, he knew not how, he dreamed not why. He was conscious of no presentiment, of no particular emotion save his sadness and remorse; yet still there seemed to be something that he could neither understand nor define. He could best express it to himself by saying that he felt as if he were not alone, as if some one were watching him as he walked so heavily to and fro.

There was no one watching him, but the feeling grew upon him irresistibly, making him even more nervous and restless than before. The light was strengthening a little; he could see into the nooks and corners, behind the old broken fountain, and under the leafless blackthorn bush. There was not so much as a stray sparrow to break his solitude.

There was a narrow round-topped door in the wall, half-hidden by the ivy; in his restlessness he unbolted it and peered out. No one was stirring. The shutters of the opposite houses were closed, the upper blinds drawn; the strange lights and the deep blue shadows were full of mystery.

He stood for a little while, leaning against the door-post. Was he falling asleep? Was he dreaming? Was it in a horrible nightmare that he saw a man lying dead almost at his feet?

Joshua Serlcote did not move; he had no power to move. He stood for a moment fascinated by terror. The dark figure was lying in the shadow of a wall, close to the garden door.

The old man recovered himself presently. Perhaps it was only some reveler sleeping off his night's revel in the snow.

He spoke, but there was no answer. Then he stooped and touched the figure as it lay; it was quite chill, almost rigid.

He had not much strength to spare, but he strove to raise the unconscious head a little. A strange tremor came over him as he did so. The man's features were turned downward and away from him, but the fair hair with the rich deep curves struck him as the perfume of a dead rose strikes the man whose heart's love is dead, and who has nothing that he can see with his eyes or touch with his hands save that withered memory-laden flower.

Another moment and Joshua Serlcote knew that he held in his arms his own son, but whether dead or living he knew not. He had not strength left within him to discern.

Faintness came over him, but he made a desperate effort to keep his consciousness. He never knew how he reached Martin's room, nor had he any recollection of the things that followed. When he came fully to himself he was in Julian's room, and his wife was crying softly.

He raised himself and looked round. It had been no dream. Dr. Sargent was bending over Julian, who was lying on his own bed with closed eyes and pallid face. Agnes was there too, and Elizabeth, but all was very still, very silent.

It was some time before the old man could speak. At last he said, faintly,

"Tell me—tell me; is he dead?"

"No, he is not dead," some one said, in a whisper.

It was Martin who answered, and then Joshua knew that Martin was supporting him.

No, Julian was not dead; he was alive again. He had been lost, now he was found. He was at home, in his own room, among his own people, and he knew it, but he could make no sign.

* * * * *

It was late in the evening of that eventful Christmas Day before Joshua Serlcote found himself alone with his son. Julian had gradually recovered; he was able to speak; but yet these two had said no word to each other.

The old man had had to plead earnestly for these few minutes, and he had promised to say little, to say nothing that might cause agitation. Martin had agreed with him that it might possibly set Julian's heart at rest and tend to his recovery, if he were given to know that he might again feel at one with his father.

Joshua Serlcote bent over his son as he might have done over a little child. His worn, anxious face was in strange contrast to Julian's, which was wan and sad, but was already beginning to take on the expression of unutterable calm seen only on the faces of those who have had but small hope of living out the storm.

It was a strangely changed face; none of those who had looked upon it had felt that they were looking upon the Julian Serlcote they had known before. They had yet to make acquaintance with this patience, this gentleness, this new humility.

There was silence between the father and son for a few moments. Their eyes met, and each knew that there was but little to be said. Presently Julian put out his thin, wasted hand.

"Forgive me, father!" he said, brokenly.

And the old man burst into tears.

"Forgive *me*, Julian—forgive *me*!" he cried. No more words were said.

EPILOGUE.

Nor deem the irrevocable past
As wholly wasted, wholly vain,
If, rising on its wrecks, at last
To something nobler we attain.

LONGFELLOW.

No wise writer of fiction attempts the rehabilitation of the character that has served him as his point of darkest shade. The process interferes with the fine proportion required by a quick sense of the artistic. Thus we have to leave Becky Sharpe playing out a play consistent to the last; Tito Melema lies dead on the banks of the Arno; Hetty Sorrel's grave is in a foreign land; and so it is through almost the entire list of works of real art.

As we have said, the writers are wise in their generation, but it may be that the generations to come will dare to look into the face of human truth even when her aspect is not poetically consistent. Has human nature grown shallower? If a man sin as heinously as David sinned, is it not possible that he should repent as heartily, return as completely? We would have our heroes heroic from the beginning, not made heroic by rising

"on stepping stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

If the painting of return and repentance be difficult to the writer of fiction, we may rest assured that the actual living out of such change is not easy in fact. Apart from all the difficulties that come to a man from within, lie the yet more inexplicable difficulties that come from without. This is beyond all question a Christian land, but nothing astonishes the majority of its people more than any visible real result of Christianity.

Julian had much to live down—the doubt of one set of his fellow-townspeople, the amusement of another, the cold contempt of a third; but he did live these things down, and bravely. Joshua Serlcote lived to see his son an honored man, and trusted; lived to see his niece a happy woman, much loved and much loving; lived to find joy in the affection of his little grandchildren, who grew up up about his knee; and lived to thank God, if not in the words, at least in the spirit of our master-poet—

"Let one more attest,
I have lived, seen God's hand through a life-time,
And all was for best."

THE END.

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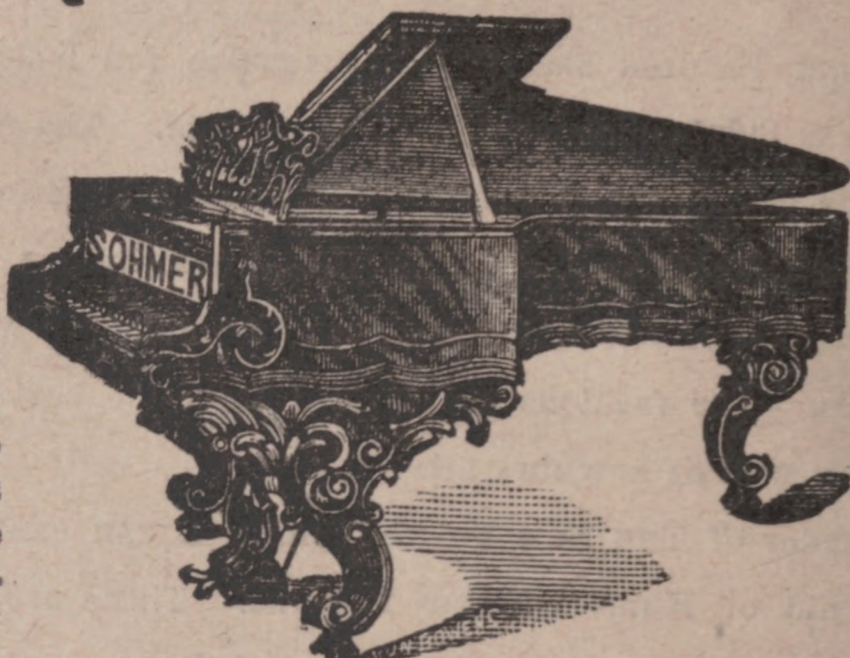
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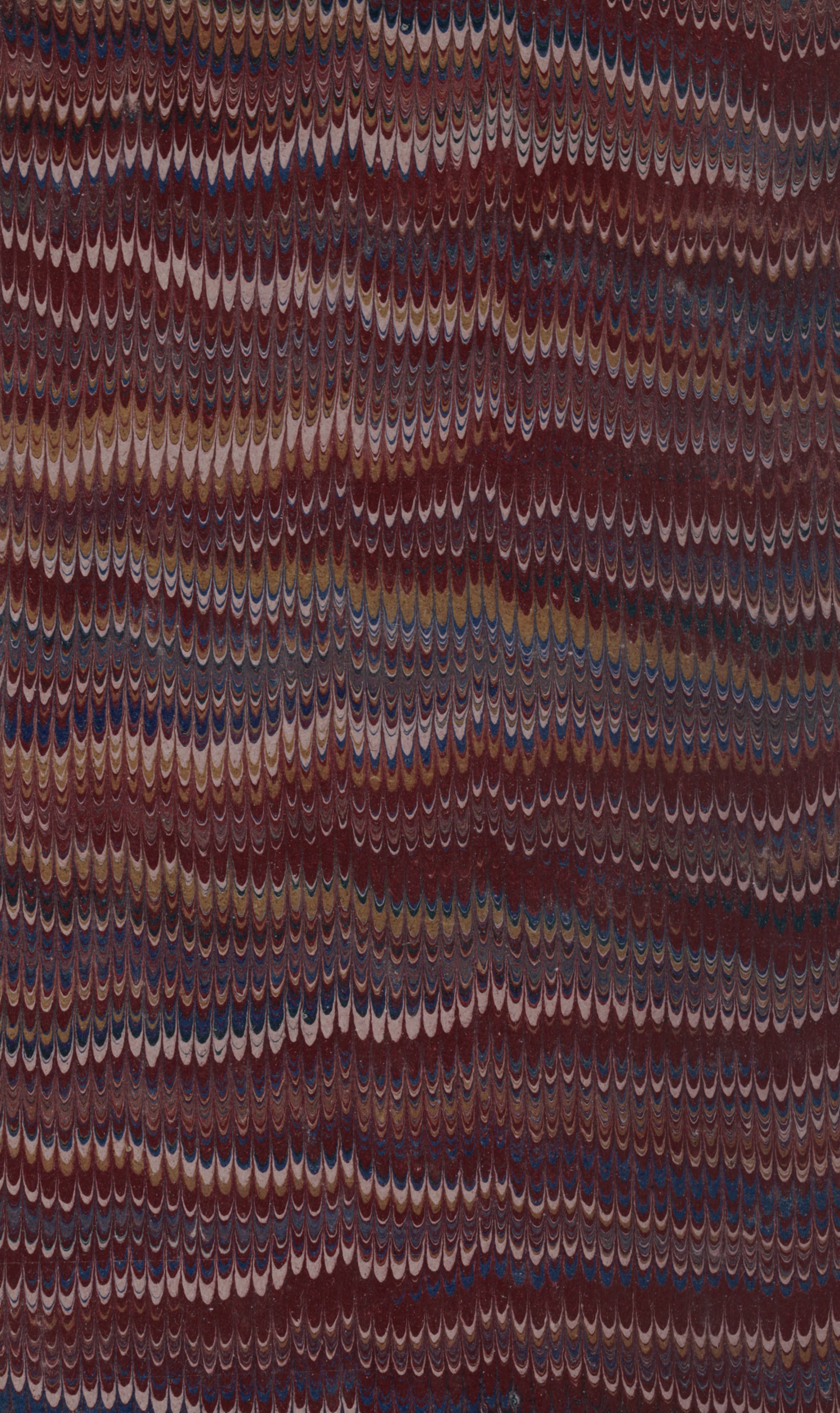
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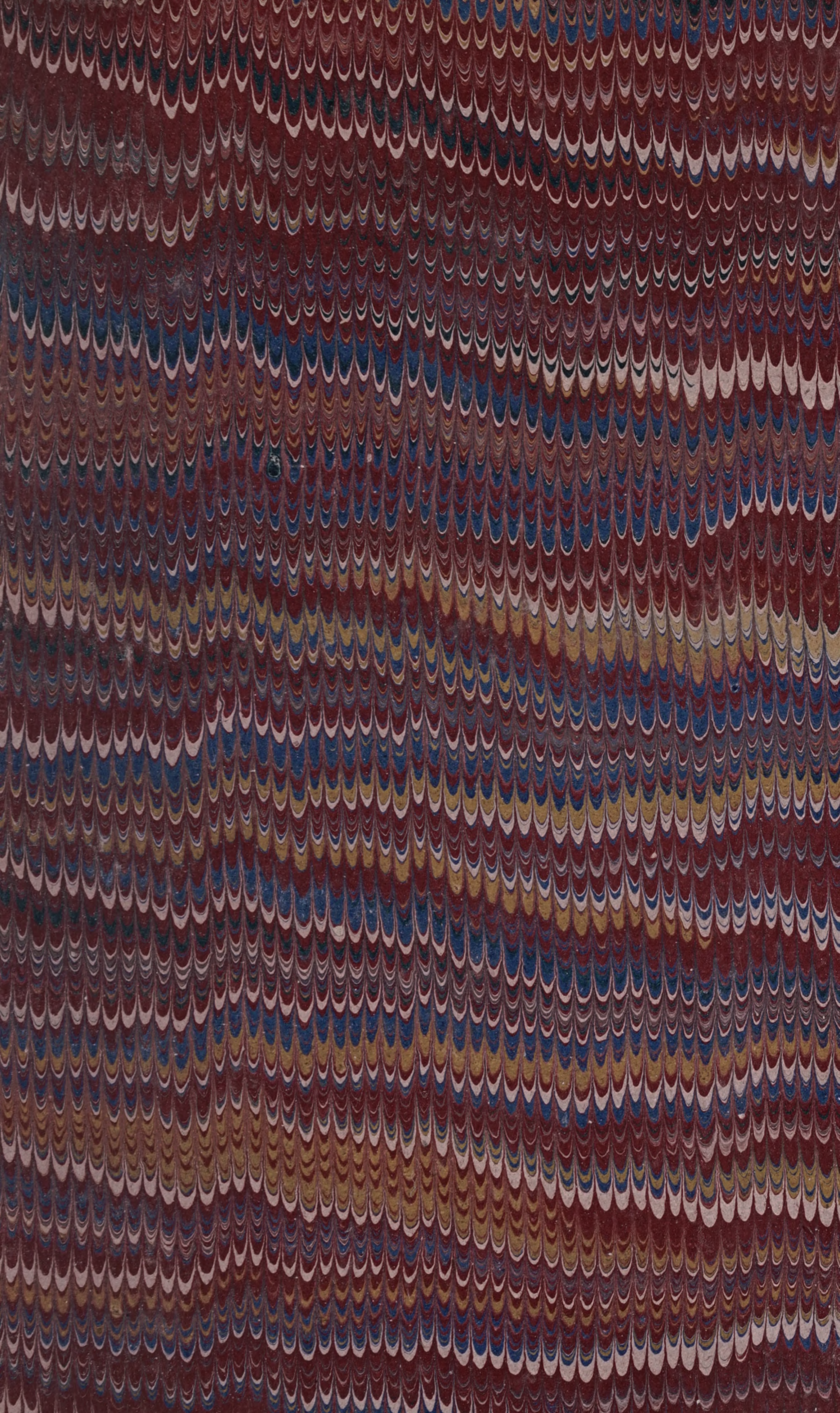
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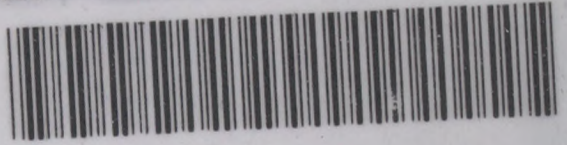
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